Architect Charles Moore in his New Haven, Connecticut, backyard in the late 1960s. He took a traditional clapboard house and poked holes through it, including this glassy rear extension.
Why Charles Moore
(Still)
Matters

BY ALEXANDRA LANGE

"Stop work. It looks like a prison." That was the telegram from the developers in response to Moore Lyndon Turnbull Whitaker's (MLTW) first design for the Sea Ranch, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. Architects Charles Moore, Donlyn Lyndon, William Turnbull, and Richard Whitaker, working with landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, had used sugar cubes to model the 24-foot module for each of the condominium's original ten units. And that boxy choice, combined with the simplest of windows and vertical redwood siding, produced something more penitentiary than vacation (it's sited on a choice stretch of Sonoma coast).

After a pause, the team scrambled to add texture: bay windows to break up the flat facades, private courtyards to differentiate a few units, and adjustments to the tower. Halprin imported a redwood stump to punctuate the main courtyard and, when MLTW's "wooden rock" was completed, Barbara Stauffacher Solomon painted supergraphics on the monochrome interiors: numbers, stripes, dots, and arrows, adding a layer of pop iconography within the still-sober weathered form. The combination of timelessness and whimsy, landscape form and antic decoration, made the Sea Ranch highly photogenic and instantly influential. It was identified with a new Bay Region aesthetic, winning the AIA Twenty-Five Year Award in 1991, and ensuring (one might speculate) Moore would never straitjacket his work again.

In the Sea Ranch—designed as a team with what would be the first of Moore's four collaborative practices—one can see the origins of the rhetoric that Moore would explore for the rest of his career, in scenographic architecture and dilatory, deceptively casual prose. From the inward intensity of his own houses—scattered from Orinda, California, to Austin, Texas, to New Haven, Connecticut—to the outward urban exuberance of the Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans and the Lovejoy Fountain in Portland, Oregon, Moore was working out ideas about how architecture should relate to history; how interiors could be stimulating stage sets for human interaction; and how public life needed to be framed for our car-centric, technological age. All themes as relevant now as they were 50 years ago.

Today, Moore can seem like something of a maverick. But in his lifetime, he was deeply connected within American design culture. As dean of the Yale School of Architecture, he hired Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown to teach, and supported their Las Vegas studio. While working on the remote Sea Ranch, he wrote his most influential essay, "You Have to Pay for the Public Life," about why California's major contribution...
The Sea Ranch Swim Club, completed by MLTW/Moore-Turnbull in 1966, was as much landscape as architecture, protecting the pool from sea breezes and containing small, skylit changing rooms.
Charles’s colleagues were his family, and all the offices and associations are related, like an extended family. Collaborating with him was something of a magic carpet ride. His extraordinary confidence and openness to the vision of others made even outlandish ideas seem plausible—at least long enough to reach the farther shore, and that was nearly always a wonderful place to land. —John Ruble, Moore Ruble Yudell Architects & Planners

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 87  to cities was Disneyland. He established the Yale Building Project—a precursor to Samuel Mockbee’s Rural Studio, which initially sent graduate students to Kentucky to build the New Zion Community Center. For a design charrette in Dayton, Ohio, Moore and his partners hired a violinist to perform along the Miami River to draw attention to the site, set up shop in a storefront to collect suggestions, and appeared on local TV, drawing call-in ideas like a set of architectural short-order cooks. Moore was Billie Tsien’s thesis advisor at UCLA, and her firm, Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, is now working on an expansion and renovation of Moore’s Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. “I can’t remember him ever saying a single word about my work,” Tsien says. “But whatever I do remember are the crazy field trips he would lead. A single day might include the Neutra House on Catalina, a ride on the 360-degree roller coaster at Magic Mountain, the world’s largest miniature golf course, and a glass of wine at the Del Coronado. He was funny and shy and generous and he taught me that inspiration comes from many places. Making a wonderful place for people drove his work.”

With each of his moves (and he was pretty much always on the move) he set up new offices with friends and younger colleagues, engaging with regional differences and other people’s ideas. MLTW fragmented after he moved east to take the Yale job in 1965. In 1969, Moore purchased the Essex, Connecticut, mill buildings out of which Centerbrook, yet another partnership, still operates. Moore moved back to California in 1975, and two years later he set up Santa Monica—based Moore Ruble Yudell, now a global firm. Collaboration, public engagement, pop culture—Moore can momentarily seem like a contemporary colleague. Sadly, he died of a heart attack in 1993 in Austin, on the morning of a planned trip back to the one place he could be still, Sea Ranch Unit #9, with its purple loft and drop-down sleeping tent.

Moore had moved to Texas in 1984 to accept a job at the University of Texas, in Austin. Once there, he followed the pattern he had established at previous jobs in California and Connecticut, choosing a site and building a house and a practice, this time with Arthur Anderson (that last practice still exists as Anderson-Wise Architects). He bought a site in the Austin neighborhood of Tarrytown with an undistinguished existing house and made a small compound in which to live and work. In an amateur YouTube video of the house—now the Charles W. Moore Center for the Study of Place—the buildings unfold like flowers, with Mexican cobalt walls, jungled terraces, Zen fountains, and baroque mirrors installed high above your head. The interior of its taupe-painted carapace—Moore Foundation director Kevin Keim describes the house as like a geode... encrusted with Moore’s collection of folk art and toys”—glows pink. (I could count on one hand the number of architects who embrace pink.) Everywhere you look, there’s something to see.

“Charles wanted to give people a chance to put their own things in and to discover different qualities in a place than the first, most obvious ones,” says Donlyn Lyndon today, “rather than reducing architecture to something completely minimal that then people wander around in.” Halprin, a frequent collaborator, thought Moore could have as easily become a landscape architect. In a 1996 book on Moore, Halprin wrote, “Charles’s houses were like gardens, gardens of fantasy and delight. [In Austin] there was a kind of arboretum of books and a secret small place behind a steel door (his own grotto) in which I can imagine Charles, like a hermit straight out of Capability Brown, reclining at his leisure.”

That quality of discovery had been Moore’s calling card since he designed his first house for himself in Orinda, which centered on two skylit aediculae—truncated pyramids, each supported by four chunky columns. Outside the aediculae (which were inspired conceptually by the John Summerson book Heavenly Mansions, and physically by the pavilions of onetime teacher Louis Kahn’s Trenton Bath House), sprouted spaces Moore would describe as poetically as “saddlebags.” Nooks, porches, lofts, and shelves designed to create room for collections and hobbies, shelter for different moods, and stages for more intimate conversations.

His interiors play with sources of light, combining bright colors with real skylights, highlighting a peak with Broadway-style bulbs, or placing a mirror where least expected. In his New Haven house, a nineteenth-century clapboard box was hollowed out, and three two-story
Sea Ranch Condominium 1 (1965), also by MLTW, shelters ten idiosyncratic units under a variety of roofs. Lawrence Halprin and Associates designed the landscape at the Sea Ranch; Joseph Esherick designed another contemporary set of houses and the general store.
Barbara Stauffacher Solomon painted highly influential supergraphics inside the Swim Club, further altering perceptions of its small scale. In subsequent projects, Moore often worked with Tina Beebe to select interior color arrangements.
Charles Moore taught me too many lessons to list—all of them now, but here are a few of the most important:

Listen carefully to your client. Don't assume that you know what they want.

You can give a client just what they want and still make an interesting and beautiful building if you use their vision as your inspiration.

There is no such thing as a perfect design. However, there is a substantial difference between good and bad.

There can be multiple good solutions to the same problem.

Your overall design idea for a building should be recognizable in a very small drawing (typically for Charles, a sketch on a cocktail napkin drawn in an airport lounge). This leads to design integrity (that can even withstand a client's numerous changes).

A good design has integrity (wholeness).

Even a master has to discard many bad ideas before finding a good one.

Promote yourself—nobody else is going to do it for you.

Don't be afraid to collaborate. Share credit.

Dress conservatively to sell a radical design.

—Mark Simon, Centerbrook Architects and Planners

towers (nicknamed Howard, Berengaria, and Ethel) were put in to better deepen, fragment, and defamiliarize the space. The towers were made of double layers of plywood, which were then cut out and painted on most surfaces. Moore's bed had a trompe l'oeil dome and American stars. Helvetica numbers were cut out of particleboard sliding doors. Frying pans hung on one marigold wall. AMAC plastic boxes created a forest of miniature towers across from a pair of columns, height "assisted" by jacks.

Did it look cheap? Yes, but that was OK with Moore. "My particular interest is in using familiar pieces, mostly cheap pieces, putting them together in ways that they have never been before," Moore said in a 1973 interview. "I think that's a better way of making a revolution than just inventing a whole new crazy set of shapes." His slide carousel of references—most frequently to Japanese wood construction, to the colors of Mexican folk art, and to the forms and drawings of the Italian baroque—were taken from his inveterate travels and his slide collection, 130,000 strong. The New Haven house was featured in *Playboy* in October 1969 as one in a long-running series of bachelor pads. Moore, round, mustachioed, bespectacled, is absent from the photos. In *Volume #33: Interiors*, Britt Eversole suggested that the gaze in the *Playboy* photographs is therefore Moore's, with "the house as a partner who keeps the party going while he discreetly watches." Charles Holland, a British architect whose own work owes a debt to Moore, says, "The easy inclusion of objects, decorations, and ornaments as part of the architecture is incredibly rare in modern architecture. And there's always a hint of decadence and hedonism about them, the fur-covered beds and the slightly fetishized placement of the bedroom and the bath."

The houses would not be the only spaces in which Moore jockeyed with the architectural establishment. Despite his distinguished academic career, the plywood, the colors, the shapes, and the neon have always tended to trip up critics. "I've had many people say to me that Charles broke things open," Keim says. "Donlyn says that, when they were at Princeton, architecture culture at the
For those who worked closely with Charles, we knew him as a disciplined, rigorous designer, wrapped in a puckish, irreverent personality. He drew clients, friends, colleagues into a magic realm of collaboration, powered by a sense of wonder about the world and an unflagging optimism about the ways in which architecture can ennoble our lives. His commitment to architecture as an inclusive and humanist art was profound and irresistible.
—Buzz Yudell, Moore Ruble Yudell Architects & Planners

time was about ‘No, you can’t do this, you can’t do that, you can only do this.’ He wanted to change it into ‘Yes.’ Architecture was about possibility.”

“Who threw this tantrum?” That was the reaction—according to Halprin—of a number of Moore’s Yale architectural colleagues when they saw his Lovejoy Fountain Shelter (1966), perched atop the concrete waterfall designed by Moore, Halprin and Turnbull. The whole Portland Open Space Sequence, of which Lovejoy is a part, recalls the natural forms of the nearby High Sierra, with sprays, erosion channels, tumbled rocks, and weirs. Made of a series of board-formed concrete slabs, the fountain works as well with water as without. The pavilion serves as both mountaintop and protection, its expressive hillocks made with a latticework of straight wooden members. One explores the fountain like a natural discovery, climbing down, scaling up, losing one’s sense of oneself in the city. Moore had been interested in water as an element of architecture since his student days; that was, in fact, the topic of his doctoral dissertation at Princeton. In period photographs, one can see the fountain and the shelter against the geometric, repetitive backdrop of nearby SOM towers. “Looking at the photograph of that form, now 50 years old, I thought: This is what people are doing with the computer now,” Lyndon says. “How amazing is the juxtaposition again with the corporate modernism in the background. The latter was the norm of the time.” Before Frank Gehry (with whom Moore and his partners competed for the Beverly Hills Civic Center) lofted an angled chain-link fence in the air at his own famous house, Moore was working with the everyday to make something more monumental, memorable, and strange.

Today the Lovejoy Fountain, like the Sea Ranch, is much more stylistically palatable than Moore’s more famous Piazza d’Italia (1978). Being inspired by nature, and cased in the hairshirt of weathered redwood siding, reads as environmental and respectful. But the idea of Portland is terribly different from the idea of New Orleans, and more different still from the idea of Italian influence on New Orleans. Yet the Piazza d’Italia—which creates intensity in what was a decayed urban landscape, deploys an artificial geography, and engages with the local vernacular—came from the same brain. The piazza reads as an exploded version of one of Moore’s house towers, the tchotchkes and fountains spreading to building facades and across plazas, the baroque scenography he used for niches and displays scaled to humans—albeit still much smaller and flatter than it would have been in Rome. As Moore explained in an essay titled “Ten Years Later,” published in the journal Places, “What could be a more Italian shape than Italy? And what more direct, and therefore effective, cultural reference in a piazza dedicated to the Italian community?” Intended as a lynchpin for a new development, a gathering place by day or neon-lit night, the piazza instead fell into almost immediate disrepair. Healthy spaces are populated spaces, and when adjacent development failed to materialize, when the city did not pay for its upkeep, the hollow fun came to seem genuinely hollow, even dangerous. The fountain, at least, was restored to close to its original condition in 2004, and was protected during Hurricane Katrina. Although a hotel has been built nearby, the piazza is yet to be absorbed into the city fabric, as Moore wanted it to be, and today remains a curiosity rather than a social center. Moore always understood how good intentions could go awry: “Buildings are repositories of human energy...if they get enough energy, they will pay it back in satisfaction, but if they don’t get enough energy, they remain incapable of paying anything back to people.”

This last value, that buildings, and places in general, need to pay something back to people, is at the core of “You Have to Pay for the Public Life,” published in the same starry 1965 double issue of Perspecta as an excerpt of Venturi’s Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, edited by Robert A. M. Stern. In that essay, Moore’s shaggy-dog mode of discovery led him from one emptied-out Southern California public space to the next. He conceded to his East Coast editors’ prejudice that there may be no contemporary monumental architecture, or no urban scene (except in San Francisco), but that’s hardly enough. “Before we start proceedings,” he wrote, “we should consider what the public realm is, or rather, what it might be in California now and during the decades ahead.” Historically, Moore continued, “Charles Eames has made the point that the crux of this civilizing process is the
A bull’s-eye on Moore’s New Haven yard. Through the glass you can see “Ethel,” one of three multistory plywood towers he inserted under the gable.
Designed in 1978, the Piazza d'Italia was built to honor the Italian American community in New Orleans. It was done in collaboration with Arthur Andersson, Steven Bingler, Allen Eskew, Ronald Fison and Malcolm Reed.
Charles spoke often of the importance of great buildings providing a sense of being the center of the world for people. He cited buildings such as the Kimbell Art Museum or Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia as great examples. He believed those projects represented big ideas: democracy, humanitarianism, rigorous attention to the details of construction. This observation of Charles’s continues to be both challenging and uplifting. As can be seen at the Sea Ranch, it’s possible to create the center of the universe on a remote site in Northern California. —Arthur Andersson, Andersson-Wise Architects

giving up by individuals of something in order that the public realm may be enhanced. In the city, say, urban and monumental places, indeed urbanity and monumentality themselves, can occur when something is given over by people to the public.”

In California, Moore found monuments at a large scale, in the loops and curves of the highways that guide you past Los Angeles City Hall or through Frank Lloyd Wright’s Marin County Civic Center. Cars had been a preoccupation of Moore’s since the 1950s: he frequently road-tripped to the Sea Ranch, and his Princeton classmate Hugh Hardy remembers him rendering a ground-level view of the building through a windshield, dashboard, and steering wheel, long before Diller + Scofidio drew their Slow House project in a similar manner. A place to get out of the car, a place to rest—that’s what Moore was designing in Portland and New Orleans, or with the internal street in a project like the Santa Barbara Faculty Club, made to look like a crooked lane, and now being refurbished by Moore Ruble Yudell.

In the past, the people gave to the public via taxes, which paid for public realm in the form of parks, civic plazas, waterfront promenades, and Moore’s beloved fountains. As early as the 1960s, Moore thought electronics were starting to replace human interaction, and that architects had to learn new tricks to compensate. He found those tricks in one place: the Magic Kingdom. When I teach this essay, students are often not sure whether or not Moore was joking when he wrote, “Disneyland must be regarded as the most important single piece of construction in the West in the past several decades.” Behind the mutton-chops, he was dead serious: “Singlehanded, it is engaged in replacing many of those elements of the public realm which have vanished in the featureless private floating world of Southern California....Curiously, for a public place, Disneyland is not free. You buy tickets at the gate. But then, Versailles cost someone a great deal of money, too. Now, as then, you have to pay for the public life.”

Because of that entrance fee, “Everything works, the way it doesn’t seem to anymore in the world outside.” Since Moore wrote this, more of everything failed to work in our cities, but many, like New York, have risen again to new heights of public life. That the method of payment—private parks conservancies, corporate sponsorships—still occasions questioning, shows how deeply Moore looked into what Americans want in their cities, in the same searching way he looked into how to make a memorable place, or a memorable house.

In 1962, Moore wrote, “Our magazines are filled with handsome photographs of buildings. But, with all this, our environment grows messier, more chaotic, more out-of-touch with the natural world and inimical to human life.” The Sea Ranch was a place to get back in touch with the natural world. He spent time there at a particular cove, which he saw as a metaphor for what architecture should do, as well as making the coves and eddies of individual units and the swimming pool. When he speaks of “handsome photographs,” he must have been thinking of the dominant style, SOM and Mies, photographed in one-point perspective by Ezra Stoller, people as hatted shadows. You can’t photograph Moore’s work like that. For many years he worked with photographer Morley Baer, trucking in his own ornaments and bentwood chairs to get the mood just right. Photographs of the early MLTW interiors, the later fountains, faculty clubs, and academic buildings are shot through with diagonals. Up into the clerestory, down into a tower, through a cutout, across a crowded room. Moore’s interest in the layers of history manifested itself through all his partnerships, in projects domestic and urban, in architecture to be experienced in movement—swinging between inside and out in a hammock, on two legs, or on wheels. In motion, he might, and we might, find the answers to the revolutions in politics, in urbanism, and the style through which his words continue to travel.