

The Legacy of Mission 66

“Mission 66,” the National Park Service construction program initiated in 1956, was responsible for many park facilities—including over 100 visitor centers—which continue to provide vital services throughout the national park system. With new construction funds recently being made available, many national park managers are now looking forward to completing needed rehabilitation, modernization, or replacement of visitor centers and other Mission 66-era facilities. At the same time, the preservation of monuments of modern design has increasingly concerned preservationists who believe that the potential historical significance of Mission 66 architecture may be overlooked. The following two articles report on some of the recent efforts of the NPS Park Historic Structures and Cultural Landscapes Program to research and assess the legacy of Mission 66 in the national parks.

Ethan Carr

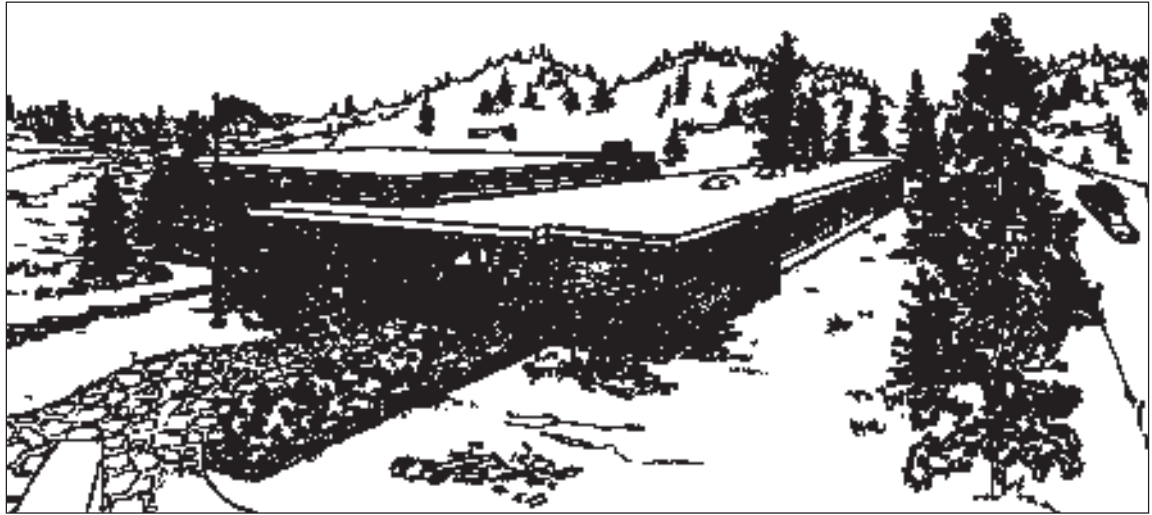
Mission 66 and “Rustication”

The goals of national park planning and design have remained remarkably constant since the earliest days of the National Park Service: park buildings and other structures should be kept to a minimum and be designed so that they “harmonize” with their landscape settings and reduce impacts on natural systems. What has changed, over time, is what we mean by “harmonize,” and how we perceive and understand natural systems and the extent of impacts to those systems. If preserving nature has remained a constant goal for park planning, nature itself has been a shifting concept.

A first generation of Park Service designers provided a powerful response to this challenge in the form of Park Service “rustic” construction. Park Service rustic was essentially picturesque architecture that allowed buildings and other structures to be perceived as aesthetically harmonious elements of larger landscape compositions. The pseudo-vernacular imagery and rough-hewn materials of this style conformed with the artistic conventions of landscape genres, and therefore constituted “appropriate” architectural elements in the perceived scene. The logs and boulders of rustic façades added to the illusion of vernacular craft, and reduced visual contrasts between building and site. But Park Service rustic design did not harmonize simply because building materials

suggested the textures and colors of nearby trees and rock formations. Elaborately ornamental façades, for example, often called attention to themselves, and buildings were conspicuously sited as scenic focal points. Rustic buildings harmonized with the site not just by being unobtrusive, but also by being consistent with an aesthetic appreciation of the place. Rustic development helped preserve nature, in this sense, because nature was conceived largely as scenery.

But by the 1930s different ideas about both nature and architecture began to be felt at the Park Service. Advances in wildlife biology and other natural sciences began to yield a more complex, scientific idea of nature. As recently described by Richard West Sellars, Park Service biologist George M. Wright, in particular, forced at least some park managers to face the fact that the biological degradation of parks could be invisible, in the sense that it had no effect (or even, according to some, a positive effect) on park scenery. This more scientific approach began to define nature in the parks more as biology than as scenery. American architecture also began to change fundamentally in the 1930s, as architects began to consider new approaches to design more or less directly inspired by European Modernism. Changes in building technology following World War II encouraged this trend. Advances in steel framing, reinforced concrete,



Proposed "Rustication" at Bryce Canyon National Park. Current proposals call for this Mission 66 visitor center (Cannon & Mullen/WODC, 1958) to be remodeled, as shown below.

and prefabricated architectural elements offered profound practical and economic advantages over more craft-oriented construction techniques. By the end of World War II, both nature and architecture were in the process of conceptual transformations in the United States.

At the same time, the national park system was immersed in one of the largest crises it had ever faced. During the postwar years, more visitors than ever before overwhelmed many of the most popular national parks, and virtually everyone arrived by car. Rustic facilities developed 20 or 30 years earlier were overwhelmed in many parks, where long lines formed outside comfort stations and automobiles spilled onto meadows and roadsides. In 1956, Park Service director Conrad L. Wirth initiated the "Mission 66" construction program, a 10-year campaign of new park development to address what had become deplorable conditions. Wirth was trained as a landscape architect, and in the 1930s he had been responsible for the Park Service's state park

development program. His chief of planning and design, Thomas C. Vint, had been chief landscape architect since 1927 and was one of the originators of the Park Service rustic style. Other Park Service designers active in the 1950s, such as architect Cecil Doty, had been principal Park Service designers during the rustic era. But in many ways this group continued the tradition of park planning that they had created over the previous decades, in other ways, postwar conditions, changing ideas about nature, and new practices in the construction industry necessitated new approaches. Mission 66 designers needed to find new ways for park development to "harmonize" with park settings.

As the negative effects of larger numbers of visitors and their vehicles began to be better understood, for example, Mission 66 planners responded by centralizing services and controlling visitor "flow" in what were called "visitor centers." In some cases, planners proposed removing some park facilities and relying on



motels and other businesses springing up in gateway communities to serve visitors. Enlarging parking lots and widening roads encouraged this trend, since faster roads made access in and out of parks quicker; but under Mission 66, parking lots, comfort stations, gas stations, and other visitor services were bound to proliferate, in any case. Conrad Wirth remained firmly committed to the idea that the parks were “for the people.” Mission 66 planning proceeded under the long-standing assumption at the Park Service that increased numbers of visitors (and their cars) should be accommodated. Modernized and expanded park development, usually restricted to

existing road corridors within the parks, was therefore proposed as the essential means of preserving nature to the greatest degree possible, while making sure visitors were not turned away.

But if Mission 66 continued traditional assumptions, it also exploited the functional advantages offered by postwar architectural theory and construction techniques. Mission 66 architects (whether in-house or consultants) employed free plans, flat roofs, and other established elements of modern design in order to create spaces in which large numbers of visitors could circulate easily and locate essential services efficiently. The architects also used concrete construction and prefabricated components for buildings, highways, and other structures. Development was often sited according to new criteria, as well. Visitor centers were located according to functional concerns relating to park circulation, and so were not calculated as components of larger landscape compositions. Although Mission 66 park development was no longer truly part of the landscape, in this sense, in many cases this meant that buildings could be sited less obtrusively, near park entrances or along main roads within the park. Stone veneers, earth-toned colors, and low, horizontal massing also helped continue the tradition of reducing visual contrasts between building and site. Mission 66 architecture was not picturesque or rustic, but it did “harmonize” with its setting (at least in more successful examples), although in a new way. Stripped of the ornamentation and associations of rustic design, Mission 66 development could be both more understated and more efficient than rustic buildings.

Architectural tastes, however, continue to evolve, as does the idea of nature. The widespread construction of Mission 66 caused a backlash among environmentalists who wanted less development in parks, even if it meant effectively restricting public access. Modern architecture has also been condemned as insensitive, and “neo-rustic” has been espoused as a contemporary style more appropriate for park settings. But it is difficult for neo-rustic architecture to do more than recall the meaning and authority of the original. Façades may once again be covered with stone and logs, but this stylistic revival has not included a return to the planning and design theory of the rustic era, which sited development in or near scenic areas in order to create total landscape compositions of structures and site. Park develop-



New Harmony?

The Visitor Center and Cyclorama Building, Gettysburg National Military Park (above), and the Panther Junction Visitor Center, Big Bend National Park (below), are important examples of Mission 66 visitor centers. In order to complete the volume of work created by Mission 66, the NPS relied on consultants as well as in-house designers. The Cyclorama Building was designed in 1958 by the preeminent architect Richard J. Neutra with his partner Robert E. Alexander, and houses a 19th-century panoramic painting of the battle. The Panther Junction Visitor Center was designed in 1964 by NPS architect Cecil Doty, with other designers in the NPS Western Office of Design and Construction (WODC). Functional and restrained, postwar park architecture sought to “harmonize” with park landscapes in new ways.



ment today is often sited where it will have the least “environmental impact,” even if the chosen areas lack scenic qualities. The preservation of nature, as it is understood today, demands a planning process that to some degree prevents picturesque architecture from “harmonizing” as it did in the past.

The taste for neo-rustic design has also resulted in numerous proposals to “rusticate” Mission 66-era architecture by adding new façades of log, stone, or simulated adobe. Original rustic façades, in fact, typically covered standard balloon-frames and concrete foundations, so why not add neo-rustic façades to Park Service modern buildings? At times, this approach may be very successful. New façades, however, will not change the basic planning assumptions under which the buildings were sited. Neither will they alter structural systems and materials that allowed the use of free floor plans and unorthodox fenestration. Original Mission 66 designs were often successful, in their

own way. But by rustivating exteriors, we may lose the chance to restore the original aesthetic and functional integrity of these buildings (many of which have suffered ad hoc alterations over the years), and in the worst cases we may end up with second-rate, modern-neo-rustic hybrids, with neither aesthetic nor functional coherence.

The original rustic era was a period of great accomplishment at the Park Service. There is less sympathy, today, for the Mission 66 planning techniques and design styles devised by many of the same Park Service professionals in the 1950s. But Mission 66 produced many fine examples of public architecture imbued with a progressive sense of government’s role in the management of national parks and historic sites. In terms of both historic preservation and simple practicality, it makes sense to learn more about Mission 66.

Ethan Carr is a historical landscape architect with the Park Historic Structures and Cultural Landscapes Program, Washington, DC.

Sarah Allaback

The Mission 66 Visitor Center

A change in philosophy That's why you started seeing [concrete] block in a lot of things. We couldn't help but change ... I can't understand how anyone could think otherwise, how it could keep from changing.

Cecil Doty, architect, National Park Service, 1986

When Cecil Doty began his career with the Park Service in the early 1930s, adobe, boulders, and hand-hewn timber were the basic materials for park buildings. The rustic style not only reflected the current philosophy toward park stewardship, but also the contemporary economic situation and nationally popular architectural trends, such as Craftsman bungalows. With an excess of manpower and raw materials, the Park Service could afford extraordinarily well-crafted facilities. After World War II, everything changed. The Park Service experienced an explosion of visitors: an

increase from 3,500,000 per year in 1931 to almost 30,000,000 by 1948. As an architect for the Western Office of Design and Construction (WODC) in 1954, Doty would find himself accommodating Park Service needs with modern buildings of steel, glass and concrete block.

Doty felt that Mission 66 planners had little choice but the modern style in which to clothe their innovative plans for the nation’s parks. The need to supervise and educate increasing numbers of visitors created an urgent call for scores of “visitor centers,” which would centralize activities and services and prevent the public from venturing thoughtlessly into fragile natural areas. In the postwar era, modern architecture not only represented progress, efficiency, and a scientific approach, but it also came “ready-made” in mass-produced parts that could be constructed on site cheaply and efficiently, which was important considering the urgency of the situation. Like the other park architects confronting the postwar crisis, Doty designed centralized visi-