

From Rustic Romanticism to Modernism, and Beyond: Architectural Resources in the National Parks

..... *Robert Frankeberger and James Garrison*

In 1865 Frederick Law Olmsted, as a member of the Yosemite Commission, reported the first reasoned policy statement for the treatment of areas that would become our state and national parks: “The first point to be kept in mind then is the preservation and maintenance as exactly as possible of the natural scenery; the restriction, that is to say, within the narrowest limits consistent with the necessary accommodation of visitors, of all artificial constructions and the prevention of all constructions markedly inharmonious with the scenery or which would unnecessarily obscure, distort or detract from the dignity of the landscape.”

The National Park System Organic Act of 1916, which created the National Park Service, echoed Olmsted’s words and challenged the new agency to conserve “the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such

means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” This concept is most often paraphrased as the dual mission of protecting the resource while accommodating the public. The historical treatment of architecture and other historic properties within units of the National Park Service reflects how paradoxical this simple statement can be to interpret. While appearing to act within its own volition in setting policy, constructing facilities, and managing and maintaining historic properties, the National Park Service has always reflected the larger culture’s view of the relationship between the man-made environment and the natural environment.

Before the Park Service

The railroads were the first national institution to face accommodating the public in a natural setting. Yellowstone’s Old Faithful Inn was the first substantial tourist

accommodation constructed by the Northern Pacific Railroad. Designed by Robert Reamer in 1903, Old Faithful Inn was a unique departure from previous staid Victorian hotels in its use of natural stone and logs and its soaring three-story lobby. Grander than any building actually constructed on the frontier, the sprawling complex was not designed to simply blend in with the landscape as much as to enhance and expand upon it.

The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad quickly followed the Union Pacific's lead with the January 1905 completion of El Tovar Hotel on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. Designed by Charles F. Whittlesley, El Tovar was described at the time of its opening as a combination of the Swiss chalet and Norway villa styles. Rustic in its use of log slab, shingle, and natural Kiabab limestone elements, the symmetry and siting of El Tovar has an awkward relationship to the canyon itself and like Old Faithful Inn does not truly blend into the landscape. The three-story mass of the building is also out of scale with any associated frontier structures near the canyon. Like in Old Faithful Inn, one of the most significant features of the hotel is the rustic lobby.



In 1914 work began on the Many Glacier Hotel designed by Thomas D. McMahon for the Great Northern Railroad. Located on the edge of Swiftcurrent Lake in Glacier National Park, the hotel again has elongated massing of three and one-half stories reflecting the Swiss Alpine chalet style.

These three examples show the common concept of building a massive centralized multistory facility similar in concept to hotel resorts in major cities but altering the palette of materials and stylistic features to be more exotic, natural, and rustic. Each design also indicates that the architect worked from building to site not from site to building. In each of these designs the building plan was designed first

The El Tovar Hotel, located on the south rim of the Grand Canyon, was designed by Charles F. Whittlesley in 1905 and was described at the time of its opening as a combination of the Swiss chalet and Norway villa styles. Photo by Jim Garrison.



Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter, designer and architect for the Fred Harvey Company, designed three buildings on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. The Lookout Studio (1914) and the Hopi House (1905), opposite page, are pictured here. Photo by Jim Garrison.

and then it was positioned onto the site, thereby not truly meeting the Olmsted goal of contextual sensitivity.

Also before the founding of the National Park Service, Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter, designer and architect for the Fred Harvey Company, worked on three buildings on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon: the Hopi House (1905), Lookout Studio (1914), and Hermit's Rest (1914). Hopi House is a culturally driven design based on dwellings found at the pueblo of Oraibi on the Hopi Third Mesa. Like El Tovar, Hopi House is awkwardly sited, and although the regional cultural theme has an association with the canyon, the cultural message has been imported to this unoriginal location, as has the

red Moenkopi sandstone that comes from a quarry near Winslow, Ariz. Although the Hopi House is three stories tall, its stepped massing and overall proportions give it a human scale not found in the hotel.

Because the Hopi House is a real copy, built by Hopi craftsmen with authentic materials (except for the hidden Santa Fe railroad rails used as beams) and real features such as doors brought from Oraibi, Mary Colter had few design challenges except for how to display the rugs, jewelry, pottery, and other tribal craft items inside the building. Between this initial project in 1905 and her next two buildings in 1914 Mary Colter had nine years to fully develop her philosophy of architecture in a natural setting. Pursuing this question became her major focus when she was hired full time by Fred Harvey in 1910.

Of Ms. Colter's two 1914 projects, conceptually the Lookout Studio is a much less complex design, while at the same time occupying the most challenging site of any rim architecture. While Lookout Studio as a new building fulfills its direct functional program as a place to be protected while enjoying views into the canyon, architecturally it is a

masterpiece of contextual site-driven frontier rustic design. Even with insensitive modifications and over commercialization, the Lookout Studio still appears to simply grow out of the landscape, not in an attempt to hide itself as much as to enhance its place and make a direct philosophical statement of the scale of man in relationship to the vast canyon beyond.

While Lookout Studio definitely set the standard for all park architecture to follow, Hermit's Rest, at the end of the West Loop Drive out from the Grand Canyon Village, set a separate and higher standard for all of Mary Colter's own work. In Hermit's Rest, which appears as an irregular but sculptural pile of limestone and ponderosa pine logs, Mary Colter not only considered her design from the contexts of nature, material, and site but also from the human perspective as she imagined the reclusive life of a locally renowned hermit, Louis Boucher, and what he might have constructed at this location. Adding a themed story line to each of her future projects provided that architectural edge that makes her buildings come alive to the general public today—an edge most architects today would dismiss as too contrived for their own

work. The visitor's personal experience of the massive stone fireplace alcove inside Hermit's Rest is definitely equal to any view of the canyon from this location. As biographer Arnold Berke states, "Hermit's Rest was Colter's most original design to date and firmly demonstrated her skill in architectural design and site planning... Colter's first essay in her unique style..."

Parkitecture

Even though nine national parks were legislatively created starting with Yellowstone in 1872 to Rocky Mountain in 1915, no true system of national parks existed. The Organic Act of 1916 would



finally set in motion a coordinated effort to identify, designate, and manage the nation's most significant natural and cultural resources. Led by the first director Stephen T. Mather and assisted by Horace M. Albright and slightly later by Arno C. Cammerer, the National Park Service embarked on its dual mission of conservation with access.

It was actually Cammerer who suggested to Director Mather the need for a division of landscape architecture within the agency and recommended Charles P. Punchard, Jr., to head up the division in 1918. This same year the Department of the Interior issued a policy statement on the management of the national parks that set forth three fundamental principles: "First, that the national parks must be maintained in absolutely unimpaired form for the use of future generations as well as those of our own time; second, that they are set apart for the use, observation, health, and pleasure of the people; and third, that the national interest must dictate all decisions affecting public or private enterprise in the parks." Punchard felt these objectives could only be achieved through adequate advanced planning. He is also

credited with implementing a system of design review for all man-made interventions into the parks.

Daniel R. Hull replaced Punchard following his untimely death in 1920. Hull coordinated his work out of the Los Angeles office of the Park Service, which was actually a desk in the office of architect Gilbert Stanley Underwood. Draftsman and later landscape architect Thomas C. Vint joined Hull in 1922. Vint took over Hull's position in 1927 when the office was moved to San Francisco. Vint would remain in the Park Service until 1961.

Herbert Maier entered the decisions on placement of architecture in the parks from another perspective. As architect for the American Association of Museums, Maier addressed the issue of educating visitors while they enjoyed the natural and cultural values of the parks. Beginning with the Yosemite Museum in 1924, Maier partnered with the Park Service landscape engineers to design the first trailside educational structure at Glacier Point in Yosemite. Although of modest scale and utilizing rustic detailing and materials, even this simple structure communicates an appropriate park-related archi-

tectural message. From 1929 to 1931 Maier would go on to design the Madison Museum, the Norris Museum, and the Fishing Bridge Museum all in Yellowstone National Park. Architectural historian Laura Soulliere Harrison states that these museums “are of national significance in architecture for two reasons. First, the buildings are the best structures of rustic design in the National Park System. Second because of their exaggerated architectural features and organic forms, the buildings served as models for hundreds of other buildings constructed throughout the nation in state, county, and local parks...”

Superintendent Jesse Nusbaum and his wife Aileen also made a lasting impression on the way the Park Service approaches contextual design. The Nusbaums felt that historical parks and archeological sites should have new museums, administration buildings, community buildings, and residences that reflect local cultural traditions. In 1921 they oversaw the development of several facilities at Mesa Verde, the nation’s first archeological national park, where a distinctive site-specific use of Pueblo Revival architecture was employed. This cultural



association for new architectural projects would continue at these types of sites until the Second World War.

Mather, Albright, Cammerer, Punchard, Hull, Vint, Maier, and the Nusbaums—these are the visionaries who controlled the initial development of the parks and established the style that has come to be known as Park Service Rustic or Parkitecture. These individuals supervised all design work from inside or outside the Park Service and also oversaw depression-era Emergency Conservation Works (ECW) construction work in state, regional, and local parks that carried the same rustic theme.

The work of these indi-

Thomas C. Vint was one of a group of architects who controlled the initial development of the parks and established the style that has come to be known as Park Service Rustic or Parkitecture. Pictured here is his Grand Canyon Park Operations Building from 1929. Photo by Jim Garrison.

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viduals has been well documented and analyzed. Their major achievements within the parks have become National Historic Landmarks. The collaborative nature of their work can be seen in the consistency of the results. The first generalization of their approach was the insistence on contextual design. The fundamental principle was that the natural setting comes first and the man-made elements must blend into the surrounding context.

This approach is clearly shown in the move to decentralize the visitor hotel into a smaller central support building surrounded by standard and/or deluxe cabins. Mather first insisted on this approach at Zion National Park, having criticized architect Underwood's initial scheme of a large centralized hotel. By having the scale of the buildings reduced and having the use of native stone increased, Mather felt the buildings, although distinctive, blended into the natural landscape much better. Repeating this basic concept at Bryce Canyon National Park, Underwood succeeds at both parks in developing his own rustic approach, which included an innovative exposed-wood structural framing system.

This contextualism extended to the other park facilities including roads, bridges, trails, campgrounds, entrances, overlooks, and vistas. Although facilities were developed throughout each park, nature at first glance appeared untouched. The success of this approach is found in the misclassification of many of these meticulously designed features and buildings as simply vernacular structures.

Contextual design is also at work in the master planning for park development areas, including the village centers at Yosemite and Grand Canyon. In 1922 and 1923 Hull worked with Los Angeles architect Myron Hunt to complete a plan begun in 1918 for the future development of Yosemite Valley. Included was a new village area to be located out of the flood plain. Also in 1922 Park Service officials, Santa Fe Railroad officials, and Fred Harvey officials began a two-year effort in conjunction with architect Pierce Anderson of the Chicago firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White to complete a comprehensive plan for the South Rim of the Grand Canyon.

Vint expanded planning efforts into comprehensive master plans for each park.

These master plans included specific concepts for development areas, justification statements for each development area, interpretative goals for the park, and an outline of administrative programs needed to implement a plan.

In addition to the buildings referred to above, other notable examples of Parkitecture were constructed in the parks between the wars. These include the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite (1925); the Longmire Administration Building, Community Building and Service Station in Mount Rainier National Park (1927); the North Rim Grand Canyon Lodge (1927/1936); and the Grand Canyon Park Operations Building (1929).

Culturally driven designs include the Yakima Park Stockade Group at Mount Rainier (1930); Mary Colter's Desert Watchtower on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon (1931); Pueblo Revival structures at Bandelier National Monument (1931); the NPS Region III Headquarters Building in Santa Fe (1937); and the Tumacacori National Monument Museum (1937).

Depression-era legislation expanded the National Park Service's responsibilities with regard to historic properties

including archeological sites, battlefields, and historical monuments such as the Statue of Liberty. During this period the Park Service developed its philosophy for treatment of these properties, such as the axiom: It is better to preserve than to repair, better to repair than to restore, and better to restore than to (re)construct. The Park Service also oversaw the initiation of the Historic American Building Survey (HABS), which has documented historic properties all across the country. Innovation in treatment of historic properties was pursued, from the stabilization of ruins to the bold decision to place a monumental cover over the Casa Grande Ruin in Arizona. These times also provided the Park Service with a large supply of low-cost labor thanks to the Civilian Conservation Corps and ECW New Deal initiatives.

Mission 66/Park Service Modern

At an American Pioneer Dinner held on February 8, 1956, in Washington, D.C., the director of the National Park Service, Conrad L. Worth, announced a new 10-year Park Service initiative entitled "Mission 66." Since the close of World War II

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the Park Service had languished with aging facilities, inadequate staff, and unmaintained roads while at the same time visitor counts went from 3,500,000 in 1931 to some 50,000,000 in 1955. Worth was convinced that a multi-year funding package was the only way to overcome the serious budget shortfall. By focusing on the needs of the visitor and the projected 1966 50th anniversary of the Park Service he was able to gain the support of President Eisenhower and Congress. One year of planning had paid off. The estimated budget needed was \$786,545,600. Included among the proposed projects were 575 campgrounds, 221 administrative buildings, 1,239 housing units, 458 treatments to historic properties, and 114 visitor centers (a type of facility the Park Service had never built before).

Gaining approval of the program wasn't easy but implementation would be an even bigger challenge. The nation had changed since 1942. There was no longer a cheap source of labor; new construction materials were becoming readily available including concrete block, glass, steel, and aluminum; the nation's concept of architecture was changing toward Internationalism; modern building codes had replaced rules-of-thumb;

machine-made products had all but replaced handmade items; electricity had replaced manpower; automobiles had replaced passenger trains; even society's view of nature had changed, with nature not simply being perceived as sublime visual scenery but as complex scientific ecosystems.

The facility designers and managers within the Park Service knew that these changes were going to affect their ability to implement the Mission 66 program, so they addressed these trends directly in their design and construction programs while stating the mission of the agency had not changed. The understanding of that mission had simply evolved as society had evolved. The new facilities, designed in a style that would become known as Park Service Modern, would now blend into the natural landscape not by the use of site-specific materials but through plain surfaces that expressed practical functionalism. Buildings were not to draw attention to themselves in strikingly scenic locations but would be placed in use-related locations away from major sites. The architectural statements would not evoke excessive, atmospheric, romanticized whimsy but straightforward, economic,

practical, and functional principles. The justification had been stated but there was still a perceived shift toward man's needs and away from leaving nature untouched.

The Park Service had already faced the issue of modernism with the 1945 competition for the design of the Jefferson National Memorial to be constructed on a riverfront site in St. Louis. The competition attracted 172 entries resulting in the unanimous selection of the stainless steel arch design of Eero Saarinen. Although the Gateway Arch was not dedicated until 1968, the idea that the Park Service could not only follow national trends but, in fact, could set them by embracing modern architectural thought had a big effect on the direction of the Mission 66 projects.

No one in the Park Service represents this shift in perspective more than Cecil Doty, at the time a leading architect in the Park Service, who had designed the Pueblo Revival Region III Headquarters Building in Santa Fe in 1937. Doty, who went on to design many modernist Mission 66 buildings including the prototypical courtyard Visitor Center at the Grand Canyon (1955), remembered, "a change in philosophy...



We couldn't help but change... I can't understand how anyone could think otherwise, how it could keep from changing." Other visitor centers designed by Doty include those at Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument, Zion National Park, Montezuma Castle National Monument, and Wupatki National Monument.

The first building to receive the title visitor center was erected at Carlsbad Caverns. It was developed in 1953 as a Public Use Building, but when the construction bids were opened in March of 1956 the building was referred to as a visitor center. Some of the Mission 66 visitor centers documented by architectural historian Sarah Allaback

Herbert Maier designed one of the first trailside educational structures at Glacier Point at Yosemite in 1924. Photo by Jim Garrison.



Cecil Doty designed many modernist Mission 66 buildings, including the Visitor Center at the Grand Canyon in 1955. Photo by Jim Garrison.

include the Quarry Visitor Center in Dinosaur National Monument designed in 1957 by Anshen and Allen (the architects of the Chapel of the Holy Cross in Sedona, Ariz.), the Wright Brothers National Memorial Visitor Center designed by Mitchell/Giurgola in 1958, the Painted Desert Community in Petrified Forest National Park designed by Neutra and Alexander and constructed in 1961-1964, and the 1965-1967 Beaver Meadows Visitor Center and Administrative Building in Rocky Mountain National Park designed by Taliesin Associated Architects and now a National Historic Landmark.

Contemporary society now questions the design principles employed to justify the Park Service approach to Mission 66 architecture. Still, Dr.

Allaback claims that the “Mission 66 visitor center remains today as the most complete and significant expression of the Park Service Modern style, and of the planning and design practices developed by the Park Service during the Mission 66 era.”

Discovery 2000

In September 2000 1,500 Park Service employees and partners met in St. Louis, Mo., to take stock of where the agency had been and where it was headed in the new millennium.

Due to a mid-1990s reorganization of the Park Service, park superintendents were now in control of many of these cultural resource management programs and architectural projects within individual parks, but little time had passed to assess how this change was working. The fee demonstration projects, even with centralized design review, placed added pressure on individual parks to prove their ability to manage the natural resources, the cultural resources, and the monetary resources effectively. While all of this was happening parks were facing increasing numbers of visitors, cars, and RVs.

The environmental move-

ment in the larger culture was gaining strength inside the agency's scientific staff. On the cultural side the agency had added many new units addressing everything from railroad steam engines to jazz.

From the plenary sessions to the small discussion groups of that September 2000 meeting, it became obvious that the National Park Service was again facing changing perspectives in the understanding of its mission. The definition of nature was moving toward biodiversity and endangered species, and individual parks were beginning to address VERP (visitor experience versus resource protection) issues, with some on the verge of setting maximum allowable daily visitor counts. Biodiversity and the changing American demographics were all points of discussion as well as leadership development and emerging management styles. While many critical issues were fully debated, several questions involving cultural resources and architectural design were postponed until a later meeting in Santa Fe.

While the Park Service appears to be headed toward some consensus between the environmental community and the staff and management of the agency's natural

resource initiative effort, more work is needed to reach consensus with the historic preservation community and the architectural/landscape architectural community.

One of the current debates centers on an increased use of neo-rustic design. Many Park Service managers have rightly objected to the continued use of modern design principles within their parks, but instead of following any agreed upon set of contemporary design standards, they have returned to a pseudo-revival use of Parkitecture. And in some cases neo-rustic imagery is being used to remodel Mission 66 buildings. From the historic preservationist's perspective there are three specific reasons neo-rustic should not be used by the Park Service. First, neo-rustic structures located anywhere near real rustic structures violate the Secretary of the Interior's Standards specifically by presenting a false sense of historical development. Second, construction of neo-rustic architecture involves embellishing contemporary structural systems used for seismic and wind resistance with archaic looking veneers. This violates a key tenet of architectural theory involving the honest expression of materials. And finally, the remodel-

ing of earlier buildings denies the fact that these resources may be significant in their own right and are worthy of preservation in and of themselves.

In an age of pluralism in architectural design and individual expressionism demanded by the architectural profession—and with such diversity in size and type of Park Service management units—are there any guiding principles that can be used by the agency to evaluate proposed designs?

First of all the Park Service should adopt the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation for additions to existing buildings of any age and/or for the design of infill buildings within historic districts. Specifically, designs should be distinctive (i.e. contemporary) but compatible, and the construction of any additions or infill buildings should be reversible. The current policy of building new structures only on previously disturbed sites goes a long way toward this goal.

Second, the Park Service should utilize the clustering of facilities whenever possible. This will both decrease impacts and increase pedestrian ambiance.

Third, the Park Service should diversify transportation and move away from accom-

modating ever-increasing numbers of automobiles.

Fourth, the Park Service should move toward universal access wherever possible, not just simply accommodating the disabled.

Fifth, the Park Service should demand contextual compatibility in design projects, but not simply from a visual perspective but from a holistic environmental sense. This contextual compatibility should be in relationship to both the natural context and the cultural context of the project. Guidance toward how to approach contextual architecture in the new millennium can be found within the regionalism and sustainability movements. And to its credit the agency has already outlined some of these principles.

Most of these ideas can be found in the 2001 Park Service Policy Manual. If the Park Service would fully implement these or a similar set of standards for future architectural projects they could again be setting the direction of architecture in a natural setting instead of relying on revivalism, eclecticism, or nostalgia to dictate the future.

Parks are for future generations. Park architecture should reflect this future.

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