Ethan Carr
Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma
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The decades following the Second World War brought a tsunami of change—social, cultural, political, economic—to nearly every corner of life in the United States, challenging Americans to rethink and renew many a cherished institution. We were, for the most part, keen acolytes of modernity, convinced that the new was inherently better than the old, that embracing change would yield a more powerful, prosperous, equitable nation. The United States was founded, after all, upon a fresh faith in humanity, and American industry and innovation had just saved the world from fascism.

The National Park Service is perhaps not the first institution that jumps to mind when we reflect on the convulsive modernization of the postwar era. The very idea of "park" is, after all, wrapped in escapist fantasy. We think of parks as sanctuaries from reality, as places magically apart from history and the struggles of the great world. And no parks generate such escapism more fully than the national parks. I remember visiting the headquarters of Gateway National Recreation Area at Floyd Bennett Field as a boy—my father needed a fishing permit—and was deflated by the sight of bored-looking, cubicle-confined office workers whose shoulders nonetheless bore that glorious symbol of adventure—the pine-and-bison arrowhead—that I associated with tanned rangers on horseback. Little did I know that my beloved arrowhead symbol was itself the product of a controversial decade-long, billion-dollar capital program known as MISSION 66 (originally capitalized) intended to modernize and expand the national park system by 1966, the fiftieth anniversary of the National Park Service. Mission 66 is the subject of an exhaustive new study by landscape historian Ethan Carr.

By the mid-1950s America's national parks were in crisis. The Depression had been a boon for the nation's park and recreation infrastructure. In New York, Robert Moses ably tapped New Deal funding to rebuild and improve the city's aging parks and playgrounds; nationwide the Civilian Conservation Corps created a rich legacy of rustic architecture and site development in both state and national parks. But the Corps was abruptly shut down with the coming of World War II, and in the immediate postwar period, Park Service funding was not increased to compensate for the loss of that subsidized labor supply. Critical improvements were cancelled at a time when Americans were visiting the parks more than ever before (56 million people toured the parks in 1955, up from 17 million in 1940). "By the early 1950s," writes Carr, "crowded roads, jammed parking lots, inadequate visitor facilities, and poor maintenance were undermining almost every aspect of park visitors' experience" (ix). Urgent action was needed.

Mission 66 was to be the magic bullet. Largely conceived by Park Service director Conrad L. "Connie" Wirth and his chief landscape architect, Thomas C. Vint, Mission 66 was aimed at a wholesale "reinvention of the national park system and the National Park Service . . . to meet the exigencies of postwar American society" (12). It would upgrade the parks for a new era of national service, renew their infrastructure and make them more relevant and accessible to a broader American public. Given the surging popularity of the automobile in this era (motor vehicle registrations in 1955 were double those of 1945) this meant primarily the accommodation of vast numbers of cars without destroying the essential scenic and natural values of the parks. Mission 66 planners built and upgraded thousands of miles of park roads and highways, developed "comfort stations" to serve motoring day trippers, and concentrated interpretive activity at roadside overlooks and a new type of facility known as the "visitor center"—a Mission 66 legacy that has since become a staple of tourist sites the world over. Mission 66 also added scores of new units to the national system; old standards like Yellowstone and Yosemite were joined by historical parks and national seashores and lakeshores, urban recreation areas, national parkways, and military parks. The impact of Mission 66 was profound and lasting: we would hardly recognize America's national park system today were it not for Wirth's modernizing campaign.

Mission 66 was greeted optimistically at first, but soon sparked controversy. Wirth, Vint, and a handpicked group of steering committee members—all white men—mapped out the future of the nation's parks in a cloud of semi-secrecy, with little public input and without consulting even individual unit administrators. Wilderness advocates recoiled at the popularization of the parks. Differing philosophies of wildland access led to fierce battles over Mission 66 projects like the Tioga Road in Yosemite. These galvanized advocacy groups like the Sierra Club and Wilderness Society, inadvertently helping bring about passage of the National Wilderness Preservation Act in 1964 (and leading to Wirth's early retirement that year from the helm of the Park Service). The architecture of Mission 66 was another flashpoint. In step with postwar architectural trends, Wirth and his colleagues favored Spartan contemporary designs that could be constructed inexpensively and employed in a variety of park settings, and which would perhaps even help forge a spiffy new identity for the Park Service.

This was a radical departure from the rustic log-and-boulder "vacation fantasy" style that had defined park architecture since the 1920s and 1930s (the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite is perhaps the grandest example). Traditionalists argued that modernism was an alien aesthetic and too urban for park use. In fact, their beloved rustic style was just as arbitrary for most parks. It did, however, appear to be more place-bound and appropriate, which gave it tremendous emotional appeal. There was a strangely oedipal aspect to all this: Wirth and Vint and their top staff architects—"presumably . . . the principal culprits in this aesthetic crime"—had also been among the "inventors of Park Service rustic design" in the 1930s (339).

Ironically, debate once again swirls around Mission 66's architecture legacy. Wirth's once-fresh buildings are today seen by as obsolete and unsustainable, and also candidates for preservation themselves.

Ethan Carr, a former staff historian for the National Park Service and currently a faculty member at the University of Virginia, is an erudite and thorough chronicler of landscapes past. *Mission 66*, his second major book, surely establishes him as our leading scholar of American national park architecture and landscape design. The book, drawing from a rich trove of primary source archival material, is organized in three parts—planning, design, and construction. Each could be a volume in itself; and therein lies my only real complaint about the work: its tripartite structure—and great length—works against the formation of a powerful narrative that would otherwise carry the reader swiftly through the work. The book's splendid avalanche of information and analysis makes it difficult at times to keep hold of Carr's narrative line. *Mission 66* is nonetheless a work of first-rate scholar-

ship and will be an indispensable text for anyone interested in the history of American parks.

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