

Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma by ETHAN CARR.

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Ethan Carr's *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma* has the look of a coffee table book with its 10" x 10" size and generous smattering of rich black-and-white photos. Don't let looks deceive, though. This book is not a fluff piece. It painstakingly and convincingly brings Mission 66 back to the forefront of national park history and argues for the value and legacy of this ten-year parks improvement program. Anyone interested in learning more about our national parks, especially as we approach the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service in 2016, as well as scholars of urban planning, suburbanization, historic preservation, landscape architecture, and post-World War II modern architecture, should read this book.

Mission 66 was the brainchild of National Park Service Director Conrad L. Wirth, who proposed a program, from 1956 to 1966, to modernize and expand the national park system. As Carr makes clear in the opening chapters of his book, the national parks had suffered from a dangerous combination of severely low budgets and skeletal staffing during World War II. With the end of the war, though, people expressed their newfound prosperity by going out on the road in their new cars and spending their expanded vacation time in national parks. These tourists encountered traffic jams along roads not entirely suitable for

modern cars, overrun facilities, and reduced educational opportunities from trained Park Service staff. National magazines and newspapers plastered their pages with editorials calling for action, and Wirth responded with Mission 66. The program improved and added park roads, provided employee housing, and introduced the now ubiquitous visitor center with its combined visitor service and interpretive spaces. Mission 66 also left behind a greatly expanded national park system, including the new concept of national seashores and national recreation areas, in addition to a host of natural and historic sites.

Mission 66 was a huge program, and Carr makes an important contribution by examining many of its facets. Instead of looking simply at visitor center design, he ties the concept of visitor centers to an expanded Park Service role in historic preservation. Visitor centers were meant to educate people about the special significance of each national park site and to engage people with reasons to protect those special resources. Through historic and scenic preservation, Carr argues, the Park Service worked toward the larger project of national park making. Carr also demonstrates how national park landscape architects used the modern shopping center design to centralize visitor services and reduce development. New buildings unnerved critics who only saw development, but Wirth and his planners tried to handle the crush of visitors in an efficient and modern design.

Here lies the heart of Carr's argument. Wirth used modernism to preserve the national parks and allow for the public's enjoyment of those parks. That enjoyment required some development inside parklands to meet visitor needs and provide interpretation. Wirth also believed that past development had infringed upon precious areas and required removal. Critics argued, however, that Mission 66 threatened the national parks with too much development. They saw the roads and modern structures, the latter similar in design and materials to the emerging suburban shopping centers around the country, as too invasive and discordant with national parks.

Why should public historians care about Mission 66 and the story Carr tells? As Carr argues, Mission 66 laid the foundation for how the national parks are funded and enjoyed today. The funding that Congress pumped into the national parks between 1956 and 1966 did not disappear but instead became the basis in terms of level and range for subsequent years. At the same time, the visitor centers, employee training centers, road development, and other frontcountry projects represent essentially the last systemwide park improvement effort. How people experience the national parks today is directly related to what Mission 66 accomplished.

That park experience was threatened, however, by the chorus of Mission 66 detractors who started voicing their criticisms of the program as soon as it started. Wirth retired in the face of mounting criticism from the Sierra Club to the new John F. Kennedy administration, and George Hartzog took his place. The Park Service celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1966 with hardly a mention of Mission 66 and its accomplishments.

Today, the physical legacy of Mission 66 is disappearing. Yellowstone has lost two Mission 66-era visitor centers, being replaced by designs that go back to the rustic architecture style. Other parks have removed or severely altered many of their modernist structures, although some Mission 66 buildings, like the headquarters building at Rocky Mountain National Park, have been named to the National Register. If Carr errs in his book, it is that he fails to recognize these losses or connect them to the larger loss across the American architectural landscape. Recent past buildings, those post-World War II modernist structures that defined our shopping, living, and work spaces, are coming down fast and furiously. These buildings, both within the parks and across the country, represent the physical legacy of the postwar expansion of the United States. Carr's history of Mission 66 captures one important slice of that story.

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