

Book Review

Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma

By Ethan Carr. University of Massachusetts Press, 2007. 407 pp.

Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, and index. Cloth \$39.95.

“Mission 66” was a ten-year upgrade program that reconceptualized fundamental aspects of the US national parks after World War II. Resonating with the military vocabulary of the time, the year 1966 marked the 50th anniversary of the National Parks Act and the establishment of the National Parks Service. Almost another 50 years has passed and, as Ethan Carr elucidates, the legacy of the project endures. It brought the national parks system into the modern era, fundamentally reshaping the physical and cultural heritage that today characterizes all national parks in the United States. As the author noted in the conclusion, “it was the last consistent, ambitious, system-wide redevelopment of the national park system” (p. 340). The aim of this well-written book is to explore all aspects of Mission 66 and to evaluate their significance. The large format publication, which is beautifully and copiously illustrated with evocative and informative black-and-white photographs, was published in association with the Library of American Landscape History, and it has won a number of prestigious awards.

Carr is well placed to write the history of Mission 66. At the time of publication, in 2007, he was professor of landscape architecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and had worked as an historical landscape architect for the National Park Service. In 1998 he had published *Wilderness by Design: Landscape Architecture and the National Park Service* (University of Nebraska Press, 1998). His wife is Sarah Allaback, whose *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of a Building Type* (US Government Printing Office, 2000) formed the inspiration and starting point for Carr’s exhaustive exploration of the project that created all aspects of the “modern” national park apart from conservation science.

Together with an introduction and conclusion, there are three parts relating to Mission 66 in terms of planning, design, and construction, and the three or four chapters in each part elaborate on the main theme. The principal argument is that after World War II, visitor numbers to national parks grew exponentially, thus stretching the facilities of roads, accommodation, access points, and potentially compromising the basic rationale for national parks. Moreover, after the initial burst of activity in the Depression era, there had been many years of ad hoc uncoordinated development that went hand in hand with a lack of maintenance and adequate forward planning. Indeed, the absence of regular investment and oversight had led to the situation that the visitor experience was unsatisfactory, and this had compromised the national park philosophy and policy that protected parks for the “benefit and enjoyment of the people.” In order to “manage the commons” rather than to witness its “tragedy,” Carr explains that the vision of Conrad Wirth, NPS Director, in 1955 was a radical one, essentially to “modernize, enlarge, and even reinvent the park system by 1966” with an “audacious budget proposal.”

The four chapters in Part 1 explain the genesis of the project, identifying the leading in-house thinkers and the challenges that they saw in the present and foresaw in the future and the careful steps that

were initially taken to meet them. Many of these issues were not confined to national parks but were, indeed, the challenges facing the postwar United States, with particular emphasis on poor recreational infrastructure, educational needs, and a modernizing urban economy based on private motor car usage. Part 2 relates to design, and here Carr's knowledge is particularly impressive as he demonstrates how reconstructing the built environment in national parks, the visitor centers, accommodation, landscaping, and tourist and access roads in the modernist style brought these "pleasure grounds" within the contemporary ethos. These chapters on interpretation, architecture, and landscape raise fascinating suggestions on the power of design to reconfigure philosophy. Part 3 explains how Mission 66 was financed and how controversies over concessions, roads, and "Parks for America" played out during a decade that saw a sea change in US politics and in environmental thinking in the 1960s. Carr's endnotes are full of additional data and his bibliography is extensive.

—Jane Carruthers, University of South Africa

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