

Mission 66

RESOURCE BRIEF

Significance

Neglected during World War II, the infrastructure in national parks continued to deteriorate as visitation soared afterward, leading to widespread complaints. In 1955 National Park Service Director Conrad Wirth persuaded Congress to fund an improvement program for completion by the NPS’s 50th anniversary in 1966. Also designed to increase interpretative programs and employee housing, Mission 66 focused mainly on visitor facilities and roads. Trained as an architect, Wirth encouraged the use of modern materials and prefabricated components to quickly and inexpensively construct low-maintenance buildings. This architectural style, which became known as Park Service Modern, was a deliberate departure from the picturesque, rustic buildings associated with national parks; their “fantasy land” quality was considered outmoded and too labor-intensive for the needed scale of construction.

Mission 66 revitalized many national parks; in Yellowstone, intended to be the program’s showpiece, its legacy is still visible. It was a momentous chapter in the park’s history, and as the park continues to reflect changing ideas about how to enhance the visitor’s experience while protecting the natural and cultural resources, the question of how to preserve the story of Mission 66 is being addressed.

While many would argue that a “strip mall” style is inappropriate in a national park, the development reflects the American way of life [then]....Everything was designed for convenience; it was important to obtain necessities quickly in order to get on with the business at hand. This led to the concentration of facilities in one drive-up location... and the lack of detailing in construction (busy people had no time to stop and contemplate workmanship).
—Canyon Visitor Center Environmental Assessment, 2001



Grant Visitor Center, constructed 1965 (photo 1987).

Goals for Yellowstone

Annual visitation at Yellowstone, which was 526,000 in 1940, reached 1 million in 1948 and 2 million in 1965. In addition to increasing the park’s lodging capacity from 8,500 to 14,500 visitors and campground sites from 490 to 1,420, Mission 66 called for building five new visitor centers and removing buildings from the park’s major scenic attractions. This would be done in part by replacing facilities at the canyon rim, Fishing Bridge, West Thumb, and Old Faithful with larger developments at the proposed Canyon, Grant, and Firehole villages. In response to visitor surveys, the park’s hotels were to be replaced with cabins and motels. The canyon rim views were improved by the elimination of about 130 buildings, some roads were widened and old bridges replaced, but momentum and funding dissipated before much of the proposed construction and demolition were done, leaving the Old Faithful Inn intact, Firehole Village unbuilt, and lodging capacity at about 9,000, where it remains today; campsites number 2,200.

Visitor Centers

The Mission 66 visitor center was intended to efficiently combine in one building functions that had previously been dispersed or deficient—visitor information, permits, interpretive displays, auditorium, ranger station, and



Canyon Visitor Center, constructed 1957.



Canyon Visitor Education Center, constructed 2006.

restrooms. Characterized by textured concrete, glulam beams, a streamlined profile, high ceilings, flat roofs with projecting overhangs, floor-to-ceiling windows, and few interior walls, the visitor center is considered the most architecturally significant vestige of Mission 66. Eight national park visitor centers built in that era have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Yellowstone's Mission 66 visitor centers, however, became known for their defects. With its large windows and lack of insulation, the visitor center at Canyon Village was energy inefficient and often uncomfortable; the roof's shallow pitch accumulated dangerous snow loads; the building was later outgrown and found to be structurally deficient during a seismic evaluation. Only its foundation and auditorium remained when the new Canyon Visitor Education Center opened at the site in 2006. The environmental assessment acknowledged that this "would result in an adverse effect to the building's historic architectural character," but "as mitigation," the new design "melds the Mission 66 architectural philosophy, which embodied a manufactured, 'modern' appearance, and the architectural philosophy of the Arts and Crafts period, which was reflected in the Canyon Hotel"—a huge wood structure, parts of which dated from 1890; it burned in 1960 before it was to be demolished.

The visitor centers proposed for Mammoth Hot Springs and Madison Junction were not built, and after plans to replace the Old Faithful developed area with a village in the Lower Geyser Basin were scrapped, the rustic 1928 museum at Old Faithful was replaced by a Mission 66 style visitor center in 1971. Its flaws were similar to those of the visitor centers at Grant and Canyon. While the Grant Visitor Center is expected to remain in use for the foreseeable future with a remodeled roof, the Old Faithful Visitor Center has been razed to make way for a larger building with a smaller footprint. With more than half of the funds provided by the Yellowstone Foundation and an architectural style designed to be "compatible with that of adjacent historic structures," the new visitor center is scheduled to open in 2010.

Visitor Accommodations

The financially strapped and mismanaged Yellowstone Park Company, which owned all of the hotels and tourist cabins in the park, acceded to Mission 66's improbable goals in order to renew its 20-year contract in 1956. Insufficient funds, delays, and structural problems thwarted the YPC's construction of new facilities. (The NPS purchased the YPC's assets in 1979 and continues to own the park's lodging facilities.) A campground, gas station, Haynes Photo Shop, Hamilton Store, and employee dormitories were built, and eventually more than 500 cabins, some of which have been replaced by the 37-room Cascade Lodge (1993) and the 44-room Dunraven Lodge (1997), and a similar fate awaits the remainder. At Grant Village, which replaced the West Thumb development, the campground opened in 1963, but the marina was an engineering failure, the area was determined to be important grizzly bear habitat, and the 900 proposed motel-type units dwindled to 300 built in the early 1980s.

Current Status

In 2000, park staff documented the Canyon Village Historic District, including the horseshoe loop with the visitor center, stores, lodge, and parking area, determining it eligible for listing on the National Register. The employee housing and former school in lower Mammoth will also be considered as a possible historic district. This designation does not mean that buildings could not be removed, added, or altered, only that such decisions would need to consider the area's historical context. An architectural historian has been contracted to evaluate all of the park's Mission 66 era structures and districts, covering the period 1956–1972, to determine their historical significance and eligibility. Especially since passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966, buildings constructed as a consequence of Yellowstone's original purpose have become a purpose unto themselves.



Canyon Village tourist cabins, constructed 1958 (photo 1997).



Mammoth housing, constructed 1960s (photo 2009).