

Architecture of Yellowstone

A Microcosm of American Design

by Rodd L. Wheaton

The idea of Yellowstone National Park—the preservation of exotic wilderness—was a noble experiment in 1872. Preserving nature and then interpreting it to the park visitors over the last 125 years has manifested itself in many management strategies. The few employees hired by the Department of the Interior, then the U.S. Army cavalrymen, and, after 1916, the rangers of the National Park Service needed shelter; hence, the need for architecture. Whether for the purpose of administration, employee housing, maintenance, or visitor accommodation, the architecture of Yellowstone has proven that construction in the wilderness can be as exotic as the landscape itself and as varied as the whims of those in

charge. Indeed, the architecture of America's first national park continues to be as experimental as the park idea.

Many factors contributed to Yellowstone's search for an architectural theme. In 1872, the park was remote and the choice of building materials was generally limited to using what was readily available—logs. James McCartney, who was encamped in the park just prior to its designation, built his earliest visitor accommodation, McCartney's Hotel, in the true pioneer spirit. This structure was soon equaled by the construction of Philetus Norris' so called "Blockhouse," built atop Capitol Hill in 1878 when it



The burlled logs of Old Faithful's Lower Hamilton Store epitomize the Stick style. NPS photo.

became painfully obvious that a governmental presence was needed to match that of the first concessioner and also to handle vandals and poachers in the new park. Designed to serve as a lookout point from which the park administration could protect itself from the (real or imagined) threat of attack by local American Indian tribes, it is no coincidence that the blockhouse was built on the highest point of ground above the Mammoth Terraces, and that it had a pioneer defensiveness design. Norris' struggle to manage the park during this era led directly to the U.S. Army taking over management to battle the insurgents and usurpers of park

lands. The army's effort began from the newly established Camp Sheridan, constructed below Capitol Hill at the base of the lower terraces at Mammoth Hot Springs.

Beyond management difficulties, the search for an architectural style had begun. The Northern Pacific Railroad, which spanned Montana, reached Cinnabar with a spur line by September 1883. The direct result of this event was the introduction of new architectural styles to Yellowstone National Park. The park's pioneer era faded with the advent of the Queen Anne style that had rapidly reached its zenith in Montana mining communities such as Helena and Butte. In Yellowstone the style spread throughout

the park and found its culmination in the National Hotel, constructed in 1882 and 1883 at Mammoth. The Queen Anne style, often co-mingled with the Eastlake style, also manifested itself in an early version of the Lake Hotel in 1889. It used strips of wood for decorative purposes, and is also seen in the much later Tower Junction residence, originally built in 1926 as a road camp dormitory. At Fort Yellowstone, the successor to Camp Sheridan, the U.S. Army also was experimenting with the Queen Anne style in the development of new structures such as the Officers' Row duplexes. Here the style is characterized less by an animated and



The Shingle-style Old Faithful Inn combines Adirondack rusticity with Queen Anne animation. NPS photo.

turreted skyline than by steeply pitched roofs and eyebrow dormer windows. The porch bracketing and the steep roof of the now-demolished Haynes House at Mammoth also carried the style into the early twentieth century.

Elsewhere in the country, nearly hand-in-hand with the Queen Anne, the architectural style of the Richardsonian Romanesque symbolized power and dominance through stone masonry. It wasn't until 1903 that this style entered Yellowstone, with the construction of the Roosevelt Arch at the north entrance to the park. Possibly designed by resident "wonder boy" architect of the park, Robert C. Reamer (of whom we shall soon read more), and by U.S. Engineer Hiram Chittenden, the structure announced the park with an adaptation of a triumphal arch—symbolizing the triumph over the natural environment.

Like the two earlier eclectic styles of the 1880s and 1890s, the aptly named Stick style represented the idea that diagonal bracing can be construed as architectural ornament. One of the earliest forms is the use of burls and gnarled poles and logs for diagonal bracing on the Lower Hamilton Store at Old Faithful. The building, constructed in 1894 and rusticated in the 1920s, represents the epitome of the Stick style masquerading as rustic in an early attempt to blend it with the natural

environment. At this early date the park concessioners were searching for an architectural theme that would, in the 1920s and 1930s, be extended into the post-Stick style of vertical and diagonal log applications, such as were seen in the now-demolished Old Faithful Cafeteria and in the surviving Lake Yellowstone fish hatchery structures.

When the structural form is hidden behind shingled surfaces, we have the Shingle style, and Yellowstone boasts one of the most original Shingle style buildings in the United States. The Old Faithful Inn, designed by Robert C. Reamer and constructed during the winter of 1903–1904, took the Shingle style to a new height—nearly 100 feet to the ridge. It wrapped the structure in a veneer of elegant shingle patterns and applied East Coast Adirondacks-style rusticity. In addition, Reamer, while certainly under the influence of the Queen Anne style, provided an animated skyline by cleverly contorting a basically symmetrical building with crazy quilt detailing. Similar emphasis on shingled wall surfaces for a rustic atmosphere is experienced at the Lake Store, begun in 1919. The formality of the octagonal towered structure is barely masked by the use of shingles and a stone masonry fireplace shaft to provide an air of rusticity.

From Pioneer-Rustic to Classic Structures

The eclecticism of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was reflected in the search for an appropriate architectural style in the park. Standard American late-nineteenth century conventions such as have been described thus far could easily be adapted to the rustic wilderness, as was demonstrated by the Old Faithful Inn. However, the architectural design conventions of America after the great World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago also suggested the power of classicism in all of its variant forms, derived from eighteenth century American Georgian architecture. The neo-classicist Colonial Revival was reflected in the remodeling of the Lake Hotel in 1922 and 1923, when three Ionic porticoes were added to the facade. This classicism, complete with its egg-and-dart moldings, clearly expressed the American ideal of subjugation of nature in the style of Greece and Rome, rather than the blending with nature. Reamer, ever the resourceful architect, also designed the new wing for the National Hotel—now the main wing of the Mammoth Hotel—in the Neo-classical style by applying columnar orders to window frames and cornices.

The U.S. Army, taking its cue from the concessioner's structures and responding to the fact that Fort Yellowstone was the second-most-visited military post in the United States, embarked on its own expansion program of upgrading their facilities. Of a pure Colonial Revival Style, the Commissary Building (today called the Canteen, housing offices and a federal credit union), built in 1905, has a templed facade with a major fan-lighted entranceway, all derived from classical detailing. Similar design inspiration entered into the detailing of the Bachelor Officers' Quarters of 1909 (now the Albright Visitor Center) and the Cavalry Barracks also of 1909 (the current park headquarters building). These stone masonry structures are redolent in their airs of classicism and hence suggest the authority of government.

On a more local scale, and at a more intimate level, the Colonial Cottage, a

derivative of the classical style seen in the urbanization of cities across the west, also is well represented in the development of the park's architecture. The U.S. Commissioner's residence (still today occupied by the resident park magistrate) represents an example in stone masonry to match nearby Fort Yellowstone. In the backcountry, the U.S. Army built the Bechler River Soldier Station complex of 1910 in this style. Well beyond the bounds of the central offices, classicism prevailed over the flora and fauna.

Like the rest of the nation, the park lurched forward, searching for an architectural style and exploring any number of Academic styles—those attempting to suggest the triumphs of other civilizations. The U.S. Army, not content with just imitating the architecture of democracy, evidently felt in 1913 that not only was the Gothic style appropriate for a religious edifice, the post chapel, but that it would also help Fort Yellowstone equal its architectural rival, West Point. The chapel set the tone into the early twentieth century for additional architectural stylistic adventures.

Experimenting with International Styles

As early as 1903 the U.S. Engineer's Office, designed by the Minnesota twin cities architectural firm Reed and Stemm, was designed in a vaguely Chinese style. Indeed, the upward curve of the green tile roof eaves has caused the building ever since to be referred to as the "Pagoda." Later, Reamer set a French tone with the inclusion of a Mansard roof on the west wing of the Old Faithful Inn in 1927. This provided a decided incongruity on his landmark building. France again entered the Yellowstone scene with the construction in 1939 of the United States Post Office at Mammoth. The French style was tempered only by the inclusion of sculptural elements representing pieces of the local environment (such as the bears that flank the front porch).

The international search for an appropriate style extended to England. With the construction of the half-timbered 1936 Mammoth apartment building, a Works Progress Administration project, one can



The Arts and Crafts movement is reflected in the logs and stone masonry of Old Faithful's Upper Hamilton Store. NPS photo.

wonder: Was the exposed half timbering meant to be English Rustic? As examples of other early American architecture with European antecedents, one could refer to the William Nichols House at Mammoth (south of the current gas station) as Dutch Colonial with its gambrel roof.

Back to Nature

While America searched for an architectural theme, one style was emerging that lent itself exceptionally well to Yellowstone's environment, simply because nature was the inspiration. The first inkling of nature as a value in architectural design came with the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. His early works in and around Chicago were referred to as the Prairie style because of their response to the flat, horizontal qualities of the prairie. Wright's masterpiece, the Robie House of 1907, was surely an inspiration for Robert Reamer's Harry Child's residence, built in 1908 at Mammoth. All of the horizontal design elements of a Wrightian structure are evidenced in the Child's Residence (also called the Executive House); all that is missing is the prairie. Reamer was so enraptured by this new design inspiration that he employed the

Prairie style in the construction of the Canyon Hotel in 1910. The same horizontal design elements spread over the structure as it sprawled up the hillside on the site of the current horse stables. It enclosed magnificent interior spaces that made much use of the geometry of the structural elements spanning enormous spaces. Sadly, the demolition of this building (it was sold for salvage in 1959 but accidentally burned in 1960) is one of the great architectural losses in Yellowstone National Park.

One of the interesting adjuncts of early twentieth century architecture which took nature as an inspiration was the Arts and Crafts movement that swept the industrialized world. In Yellowstone, this ideal of handmade or "back-to-nature" is exemplified in the 1908 construction of the Norris Soldier Station, designed by none other than Robert Reamer. Reamer chose the local material, logs, but inventively massed them into a bungalow-like structure that served the Army's backcountry patrol efforts. This bungalow form, an offshoot of the Arts and Crafts style, was also the design inspiration for Reamer's Mammoth Hotel Cottages, built in 1938.

In 1929, Reamer designed the Upper Hamilton Store in the Old Faithful area.

This building reflects the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement, particularly in the elegant handling of the stone masonry piers of the porticoes. It is interesting to speculate on the design origins of this building when the record indicates that a Spanish-style store was originally designed for this site. However, then-Superintendent Horace Albright objected and requested a concrete log building patterned after the Awahnee Hotel in Yosemite, which was designed by Gilbert Stanley Underwood, who had also designed the 1927 stone masonry and log elevations of the Old Faithful Lodge.

The Arts and Crafts style of the concessioner buildings was further enhanced with the introduction of another residence at Mammoth in 1927 that utilized shingles and heavy timbers. Simultaneously, the National Park Service was beginning to realize that there just might be a theme drifting in the wind when Dan Hull designed the 1922 community building at Lake Yellowstone. This octagonal log structure with its projecting wings not only pushed the envelope in environmental design, but also offered an interesting beginning to the idea of interpretation in the park by attracting the visitors to fire-side chats around the central fireplace. This idea of rustic buildings for a national park had been a kindle for several years when the National Park Service designed, in 1923, a standard log ranger station that was to find its way to several parks, including Yellowstone at the Fishing Bridge area. It represented the style of Neo-Rustic Revival, which was based on the concept of hearth and home.

The Rise of “Parkitecture”

All of these new rustic ideas were combined in the works of Herbert Maier, who designed four museums that were financed by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation. In addition to providing interpretation at key locations, the museums, three of which remain, launched the style which is now referred to as “Parkitecture.” Maier’s brilliant Norris Museum, which serves as the gateway to the Porcelain Geyser Basin, set the pace in the use of stone masonry and log construction. Built in 1929, this museum

helped define the Park Service’s six principles of what rustic buildings should be in a rustic environment.¹ One principle is that buildings should be in harmony with the natural surroundings and should be secondary to the landscape rather than primary, as in a city or town. Two, all buildings in any one area should be in harmony—that is, similar materials should be used in the design, roof slopes should be about the same, and type of roof should be similar. Three, horizontal lines should predominate in National Park Service buildings, rather than vertical, which is found more in cities. Maier’s design for Madison Museum, also built in 1929, reflects principle number four: it is advisable to avoid rigid, straight lines when possible, creating the feeling that the work was executed by pioneer craftsmen. This applies to log ends, ironwork, hardware, and other design aspects. The construction of Lake Museum near Fishing Bridge in 1930–31 exemplified the fifth principle: stone work, log work, and heavy timber work should be in scale, providing a well-balanced design. And, six, in some cases it is necessary to make the stone work and log work a little oversize so that large rock outcroppings and large trees do not dwarf the buildings, giving the impression of underscale.

Maier’s designs set the tone for the 1930s decade of the Works Progress Ad-

ministration and the Civilian Conservation Corps. Notable examples in Yellowstone emulated the six principles in design and provided the introduction of a unifying theme beyond park headquarters at Mammoth. By 1931, interpretation of various sites along the Grand Loop Road were supported by elegant kiosks such as the one that still exists at Obsidian Cliff. Ranger stations, including the 1922 structure at West Yellowstone, used locally obtained materials (logs) to integrate buildings with their surroundings. Structures such as the Northeast Entrance Station, designed by the NPS Branch of Plans and Design in 1935, eloquently evoked a sense of entry into a special natural area. The log work of this structure was equaled in a master stroke by the buttressed crowning of the adjacent residence, built in 1936. Carefully chisel-pointed as a suggestion of pioneer work, the projecting crowns sweep to the roof eaves. Logs can have elegance, too.

Going Modern

While the Arts and Crafts style flourished and mellowed into Parkitecture away from headquarters, new buildings, at Mammoth in particular, got a new look. Modernism arrived direct from the centers of Art Deco and Art Moderne,



The Norris Museum exemplifies “Parkitecture,” and helped define ideals of rusticity in the national parks. NPS photo.



The Canyon Visitor Center was built in the Modern style during the Mission 66 period. NPS photo.

particularly where there was a ready access to terracotta, which lent itself easily to the use of fluting, chevrons, and geometric shapes. Everything was soon “up-to-date” at Mammoth with the reconstruction of the fire-damaged hulk of the old National Hotel. The remains of the hotel were redesigned in the Art Deco style in 1936 by the Yellowstone master of all styles, Robert C. Reamer. Reamer clad the hotel structure in stucco, fluted columns, and cast-composition rosette blocks. The new style was fully expressed by foliate iron work.

At Gardiner, near the north entrance to the park, the concessioner built warehouses in an adaptation of the Art Moderne style, a streamlined version of Art Deco. The warehouses, designed by Link and Haire of Helena, Montana, expressed the solidity of the style in concrete. Conversely, the Moderne style is represented in frame construction at the 1928–29 Haynes headquarters building (today’s Hamilton Nature Store) at Mammoth, designed by Fred Willson of Bozeman, Montana. Here, planes of shingling without ornament echoed the new styles of modernism. This was in stark contrast to the development of rustic buildings in the heart of the park that were the glory of the WPA-CCC days, all of which came to an end with the

advent of World War II.

The war years halted construction throughout the nation. Yellowstone was no exception; gasoline was rationed, the hotels closed until the end of war, trains were commandeered for military rather than passenger use, and the overall effect was a decline in tourism and maintenance. Even after the war, interest in reopening the facilities lagged.

The rise of a new touring public

prompted some refurbishing by 1950, but mostly it demonstrated how woefully inadequate the park facilities were to meet travelers’ needs. Visitors had changed in the interim. They drove their own cars, demanded more interpretation of resources, and sought better accommodations. Yellowstone, like most of the national parks, was ill-prepared for the second half of the twentieth century. To meet the needs of a new public, the Mission 66 program for new construction was initiated in 1956 to remedy deficiencies in park facilities by 1966. The new program was unabashedly responsive to modernism in order to “fast track” the massive construction effort.

In Yellowstone this new modernism led directly to the construction of developed areas such as at Bridge Bay which, in a modern sense, took on a contemporary look of a fishing village. The visitor center at Canyon employed slump block as a new, vaguely rustic building material that defined a stylistic progression to a watered-down version of the Miesian style based on the ideas of architect Mies van der Rohe. A new visitor center replaced Herbert Maier’s old Rustic-style visitor center at Old Faithful. Its Expressionistic-style roof structure floats over a Formalist-style facade. In an effort to blend tortured modernism into a compatible whole, the architect clad the surfaces



Postmodernism came to Yellowstone with the Grant Village development (dining room pictured). NPS photo.

with shingles in homage to Old Faithful Inn and produced a building caught in a time warp. The struggle for a new park style continued through the Mission 66 building boom only to go dormant when the money ran out by the end of the 1960s.

By the mid-1970s the park's older hotels were derelict and the situation launched a new era of upgrading the facilities. A new park architecture emerged that set the stage for a few early attempts at design compatibility, though some now seem heavy handed, such as the boldly expressed modern style stair towers on the Old Faithful Inn. Perhaps one can now view these as a Deconstructionist style when viewed in contrast to the earlier structure. The search for a compatible modern style spilled over into the design of the modular Mammoth dormitory adjacent to Mammoth Hotel. Here the modern style is masked by gabled roofs and rough-sawn siding used to "relate" a large sprawling building to a park environment.

Subsequently, the Post-Modern style moved into the park through the architecture of Spenser and Associates of Palo Alto, California, with the design of new visitor facilities at Grant Village. The dining room building is characterized by a massive roof, multi-mullioned windows, and shingling. The registration building was designed in a more sculptural form, but the architects continued to masquerade the buildings as traditional rustic with the use of shingle cladding. An idea of natural buildings in a natural environment was once again in the germinating stage. These buildings are grand statements in the Yellowstone search for a style, but unfortunately fell short in unifying the building collection of Grant Village.

Back to the Future

The park and its concessioners' struggles for architectural identity focused on marketing their own history. As a consequence, since the early 1980s, the park hotel facilities have been and are being rehabilitated following the trends of the country, incorporating input from the NPS, its concessioner partners, and



The new Old Faithful Snow Lodge is typical of 1990s neo-traditionalism. NPS photo.

independently contracted cultural resource professionals and architects. This rehabilitation movement has given rise to the last architectural style of the twentieth century: Neo-Traditionalist—the mark of the 1990s. The Park Service has followed suit and taken a further step with the construction of new log buildings at various areas in the park to capture a style of Neo-Rustic Revival. Buildings such as the South Entrance Ranger Station exemplify this trend of attempting to recapture a unique park experience. At strategic points, park management has made a statement that Yellowstone is a special place with special architecture. This idea is best illustrated by the construction of the new Old Faithful Snow Lodge, designed by A & E Architects of Billings, Montana. In combining the best of Old Faithful Inn and Old Faithful Lodge, the architects have clearly expressed the idea that any new building in Yellowstone should be subordinate to its historic neighbors, as infill within a historic district. The new Snow Lodge stands out in this context, yet is surely to someday join the ranks of its exalted neighbors as a National Historic Landmark.

The Snow Lodge demonstrates that the twentieth century struggle for a Yellowstone style has been brought to a conclusion. There is no one park style but, like

America as a whole, the richness of the fabric that characterizes the architecture at once unites the park with the rest of the country and also makes it a very special place.

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NOTES

¹ Thomas C. Vint, "Report on the Building Program from Allotments of the Public Works Administration," National Park Service Western Division, 1933–1937, compiled by Edward A. Nickel, pp. 12–13.