# THE EMERGENCE OF THE MISSION 66 VISITOR CENTERS
## by CHRISTINE MADRID FRENCH©

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## Introduction

The visitor center, a familiar building type constructed for use by private corporations and governmental organizations alike, did not exist before the National Park Service Mission 66 program. Park Service planners, architects, and landscape architects devised the concept to incorporate visitor facilities, interpretive programs, and administrative offices in one structure named the "visitor center." In a departure from the rustic-style buildings constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) for the Park Service in the 1930s, Mission 66 designers embraced a contemporary structural form for the new centers. As the construction program continued, the distinctive and prominently located buildings became emblematic of the massive improvement project and demonstrated the new commitment of the Park Service to interpretation of park resources and accommodation of visitors and personnel.

Contrasting with the reserved residential character of the CCC administrative buildings, the Mission 66 visitor centers conveyed a bold commercial appearance to entice and attract visitors. Prominently sited on major entry roads, the buildings became an instantly recognized feature of the parks, advertising public service, orientation information, and other amenities. Modern materials and design characterized the new park architecture, with open interior spaces and expansive areas of glazing to provide views of nearby natural and cultural resources. The strikingly contemporary buildings in the parks symbolized, for the visiting public and the agency itself, the achievements of the Mission 66 program and a new era in the National Park Service.

## Progress and Modernization: The "Mission 66" Program

Mission 66 represented the largest program for park improvements ever initiated by the National Park Service and is one of the most significant federal undertakings of the twentieth century. In 1955, responding to mounting political and public pressure, Conrad Wirth, Director of the National Park Service, proposed a ten-year building improvement program to regenerate and modernize the national parks. New accommodations were desperately needed by 1966, the fiftieth anniversary of the Park Service, to serve an expected eighty million annual visitors. With the goal-oriented ideology of the project in mind and the proposed date of completion set, the committee chose the name "Mission 66" for the program.[1]

By the end of the billion-dollar program, the parks and the public enjoyed a wealth of modern services, including 584 new comfort stations, 221 administrative buildings, 36 service buildings, 1,239 units for employee housing, and more than 100 new visitor centers.[2] The Park Service also acquired 78 additional park units under the program, an increase of almost forty percent over the 180 parks held in 1956. New parks authorized during Mission 66 included the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park in Maryland and West Virginia; Frederick Douglass National Historic Site in Washington, D.C.; Canyonlands National Park in Utah; and the Edison National Historic Site in New Jersey.[3]

Several of the most impressive building projects associated with the Park Service today resulted from Mission 66 efforts. The Gateway Arch, designed by architect Eero Saarinen in 1949 for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial National Historic Site, St. Louis, remained unfinished until Mission 66 funding permitted its completion. Another significant Mission 66 project is the Blue Ridge Parkway, a 469-mile scenic road running through Shenandoah National Park in Virginia to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina and Tennessee. Only about one-third of the total planned distance had been finished when work stopped in the 1940s. Construction began again under Mission 66, which contributed "better than 75 per cent of the cost" for the route.[4] The scenic Colonial Parkway connecting Jamestown to Williamsburg in Virginia was completed, as was a seven-mile extension of the George Washington Memorial Parkway from Spout Run to the Capital Beltway in Washington, D.C.

Mission 66 funds not only provided for new construction, but also for the preservation of historic sites. The program reinitiated the recording of historic landscapes and buildings by the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1957, financed rehabilitation work at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, and established the Registry of National Historic Landmarks in 1960.

While assessing the accomplishments of the Mission 66 program, historians might easily overlook a significant and lasting contribution to National Park Service architecture and American popular culture: the "visitor center." Few recognize that this now ubiquitous building type has a history of its own, associated with such well-known designers as Richard Neutra and some of the most sacred landscapes of American history.

## The Emergence of the Visitor Center

Park planners first articulated their vision for the Mission 66 visitor centers in a 120-page outline and prospectus for the project, dated January 1956. The report identified the visitor center as "the hub of the park interpretive program," staffed by "trained personnel . . . [to] help visitors understand the meaning of the park and its features, and how best to protect, use, and appreciate them." The Park Service hoped that the expanded orientation and education program would reduce reported vandalism and overuse in the parks. As part of the effort to "help the visitor see the park and enjoy to the fullest extent what it has to offer," the construction of visitor centers was seen as "one of the most pressing needs for each area."[5] The outline proposed that one hundred new visitor centers would be necessary at the national parks.[6]

In contrast to earlier park design policies that discouraged conspicuous building locations, the Mission 66 visitor centers occupied prominent areas of high visitation to ensure that a larger percentage of tourists received information about the park and were aware of available interpretive programs. Park superintendents considered sites near entrance points to the park, in areas with concentrated visitor services, or adjacent to interpreted resources to be the "most effective" locations for the visitor centers.[7] Park rangers argued for the same, fearing that centers placed too far from historic and natural attractions would have lesser impact on hurried visitors. Theodore E. White, museum geologist at Dinosaur National Monument, drew a parallel to successful commercial practices as an example for park interpretation: "A department store does not prepare a prospective customer for a display of dress shirts in a building two blocks away from the store. Eighty percent of the effectiveness of any exhibit whether in a museum or a department store window is the impact of the first view. So why work against ourselves by dividing our show?"[8] The chief ranger at Dinosaur agreed, stating that the quarry site was also "ideal" for interpretation of the rocky landscape "since it is higher than the surrounding terrain and set a little apart from it...affording the visitor an unobstructed panoramic view of the scenic and geological features."[9] Other parks planned the location of their new visitor centers in consideration of similar interpretive requirements. At Gettysburg a Planning Conference composed of "officials from Washington, Regional, EODC [Eastern Office Division of Design and Construction] Offices, and the Park staff" selected a site for the visitor center, specifying "Cemetery Ridge in the general area between Zeigler's Grove and the Meade Statue," adding "The Cyclorama relates to a specific event and should be located near the site of the event."[10]

## New Buildings in the National Parks

The first ten visitor centers opened in 1957. The visitor center building program included the construction of entirely new structures, but also accommodated the adaptation of existing park or historic buildings for expanded use.[11] The National Park Service Eastern Office of Design and Construction produced many of the plans, assisted by Park Service architects such as Walter Roth, Benjamin Biderman, and Donald F. Benson. For a limited number of projects the National Park Service commissioned prominent American architects to create showpiece buildings. Of the one hundred visitor centers completed during the program, only five were designed by nationally or internationally known private architects: the Quarry Visitor Center at Dinosaur National Monument in Utah, by Anshen and Allen; the Wright Brothers National Memorial Visitor Center in North Carolina, by Romaldo Giurgola of Mitchell/Giurgola, Associates; and the Beaver Meadows Visitor Center at Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, by Wesley Peters of Taliesin West Architects. Two were designed by Richard J. Neutra of Neutra and Alexander: the Petrified Forest National Monument Visitor Center in Arizona, and the Gettysburg Visitor Center and Cyclorama at Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania. The unique and distinctive character of each of these structures expresses the diversity of resources held by the National Park Service.

The modern building forms of the Mission 66 visitor centers referenced regional architecture and complemented the natural and cultural resources at each park. The architects of the visitor centers employed more sophisticated interpretations of regional forms than the rough wood lodges and adobe houses built during the CCC period. For example, the modern visitor center in Sitka National Historical Park, Alaska, commemorating the nineteenth century Battle of Sitka near the ruined Tlingit Fort, recalls the traditional Tlingit plank house with its wide-gable roof over vertically laid wood-plank walls. [12] The small Logan Pass Visitor Center on Going to the Sun Highway at Glacier National Park in Montana articulated the rocky heights of the surrounding mountains with an asymmetrically angled gable roof and decorative wall portions of random rubble stone masonry. Antietam National Battlefield Visitor Center evoked the stone walls and bridges of the Civil War-era countryside through its use of light-colored gray fieldstone on the exterior of the building.

Other visitor centers conveyed the symbolic character of park service resources. The building at Wright Brothers National Memorial Visitor Center mimicked the design of modern airport terminals, such as the 1959 Trans World Airlines (TWA) Building at John F. Kennedy International Airport, in its use of untreated, poured-in-place reinforced concrete to create sculptural forms. Located near rebuilt structures duplicating the original hangars on site, the visitor center drew a connection between the historic scene of the first flight and air travel in the mid-twentieth century.

Gettysburg Visitor Center and Cyclorama, noted for its bold Modernist program, alluded to commemorative architectural traditions in its large scale and white-painted concrete exterior. Architect Richard Neutra, in his own writings, consistently referred to this building as the "Lincoln Memorial," dedicated to "the ideals of mankind which must endure." The design included a "solemnly illuminated rostrum" near enormous sliding glass doors that could be opened so that the speaker could address audiences gathered outside "in the shadow of the oak trees of historic Ziegler's Grove." **13**

The idea of a visitor center acting also as a memorial to historic events is evidenced at other parks. Manassas National Battlefield Park in Virginia planned to erect a Civil War memorial similar to that at Gettysburg with funding provided by Mission 66. The "Civil War Hall of Fame," as it was called there, consisted of a "large marble building" that functioned not only as an interpretive aid, but also housed "a library, flag hall, large rotunda, and administrative functions." This structure never progressed past the planning stages.**14**

Over the course of the ten-year program, the visitor centers came to symbolize, for visitors and Park Service administration, the accomplishments of the Mission 66 program. The new building type, a large part of the building improvement project, changed the character of architecture and public service at the national parks. The nostalgic period reflected by the earlier CCC structures, limited in its scope and applicability, was largely abandoned in favor of this unified contemporary architectural statement. The modern structures heralded a new period for the National Park Service and demonstrated its efforts to protect historic and natural resources as well as accommodate and educate the people.

## Preservation or Demolition? Debating the Future of the Mission 66 Visitor Centers

Once proud symbols of the new direction of the National Park Service, the Mission 66 visitor centers are now suffering from years of deferred maintenance and overuse. The large-scale infrastructure developments of the mid-1960s, designed to serve 80 million people each year, are now overburdened with visitation approaching 260 million annually. The prominent location of the Mission 66 visitor centers is seen by many park administrators as a hindrance to the visitor experience. Changing interpretive strategies and new patterns of visitation have called the once carefully chosen sites into question.

Critics of the centers persistently cite the Mission 66 structures as "insensitive" to regional environments. The bold modern architectural forms are now considered incompatible with the nature of most Park Service sites while the buildings themselves are viewed as uncomfortably close to historic and cultural resources. The Gettysburg Visitor Center and Cyclorama, for example, has been vehemently criticized for its intrusion on the historic, rural Civil War landscape. The park superintendent has called for the demolition of the building and restoration of the battlefield to its appearance in 1863. Park administrators at Wright Brothers National Memorial also proposed demolition of their Mission 66 visitor center, citing similar discontent with the close proximity of the structure to the historic resource.

Advocates for the preservation of the Mission 66 visitor centers have called attention to their architectural significance as early expressions of Modernism within the national parks. A recent evaluation of the Giurgola-designed Wright Brothers Visitor Center by the North Carolina State

Historic Preservation Office hailed the structure as "one of the most outstanding examples of modernist architecture built in North Carolina" and "a vital part of the state's twentieth century architectural heritage."**15** The architect himself, "saddened by the decision" to demolish his building, recently argued that its design "reflected the particular period of American architecture of the early 60s in which the rigidity of modernism evolved into more articulated solutions."**16**

The memorial character of some visitor centers also deserves attention in the debate over preservation and restoration of the buildings. Previous efforts to restore battlefield landscapes, such as Gettysburg and Antietam, have addressed the conservation of later monuments, structures, and road features that commemorate the historic events associated with those sites. The tour roads constructed by the War Department and the numerous discrete pieces of statuary dotting the battlefield are protected by listing in the National Register as part of the history of Civil War interpretation. The Gettysburg Visitor Center and Cyclorama, collectively designated by architect Neutra as the "Lincoln Memorial," also merits protection as a significant resource contributing to the history of commemoration at the site

As more parks modify their general management plans to accommodate contemporary visitor needs, the design program of the visitor centers of Mission 66 is increasingly challenged. Today, only a small number of historians, preservationists, and park employees have shown an interest in conserving the modern architecture of the National Park Service. In consideration of the lasting contributions of the Mission 66 program, and the visitor centers in particular, the preservation and maintenance of these structures as indicative and expressive of a significant building period should be a priority for the parks. Only far-sighted planning by Park Service administrators can ensure that a few of these landmark buildings remain for future visitors and continue to work for the public.

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## Endnotes:

1. Original visitation estimates as compiled by the Mission 66 committees were far shy of actual numbers. In1966 the national parks recorded 112 million visits, 30 million over the original estimate made ten years earlier and representing an increase of 79 million visits over sixteen years.

2. The total number of visitor centers completed varies according to the source. Conrad Wirth, in his book, Parks, Politics, and the People (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), states that there were 114 (p. 270), while the "Mission 66 Progress Report," dated March 1966, in the last months of the program, stated "100 new visitor centers were constructed or authorized for construction," (p. 35). No single list of visitor centers authorized, built, or rehabilitated from older structures has been located in U.S. Department of the Interior or National Park Service records.

3. Wirth, Parks, Politics, and People, 260.

4. Wirth, Parks, Politics, and People, 274.

5. National Park Service, "Mission 66: To Provide Adequate Protection and Development of the National Park System for Human Use." (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1956), 29, 92, photocopied. At other public parks, it was recognized that "the more interesting and satisfying we can make our parks (especially for young people) the less vandalism there will be." Ben Whitaker and Kenneth Browne, Parks for People (London: Seeley Service & Co., 1971), 76.

6. National Park Service, "Mission 66: To Provide Adequate Protection and Development of the National Park System for Human Use," 93-94.

7. Daniel J. Tobin, Regional Director, to Director, National Park Service, Region Five, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 16 May 1957. Memorandum. Revised Prospectuses, Mission 66, 1960-61, RG 79, National Archives Building,

Washington, D.C.

8.White, Theodore E., Museum Geologist, to Superintendent, Dinosaur National Monument, Jensen, Utah, 8 February 1956. Memorandum, Dinosaur National Monument, Revised Prospectuses, Mission 66, 1960-61, RG 79; National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

9. Dick, Oscar T., Chief Ranger, to Superintendent, Dinosaur National Monument, Jensen, Utah, 8 February 1956. Memorandum, Dinosaur National Monument, Revised Prospectuses, Mission 66, 1960-61; RG 79; National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

10.Chief, Division of Interpretation, Washington, D.C., to Chief, Mission 66 Staff, Washington, D.C., 27 July 1956, Memorandum, Gettysburg National Military Park, Revised Prospectuses, Mission 66, 1960-61; RG 79; National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

11. Of the one hundred visitor centers completed or underway by 1963, seventy-nine were entirely new buildings, while another twenty-one were "reconstructions" or adaptations to existing structures. National Park Service, "Mission 66 Progress Report, October 1963" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1966), 11, photocopied.

12.Alison K. Hoagland, Buildings of Alaska (Society of Architectural Historians, Buildings of the United States Series, ed. Osmund Overby. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17.

13. W. Boesiger, ed. Richard Neutra 1950-60 Buildings and Projects (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1959), 193.

14. Joan M. Zenzen "Battling for Manassas: The Fifty-Year Preservation Struggle at Manassas National Battlefield Park." (TMs [bound photocopy]. Produced by History Associates Inc., Rockville, MD, for the National Park Service,1995), 127.

15. North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, "Evaluation of the Visitor Center (Mitchell/Giurgola, 1959-1960), Wright Brothers National Memorial," 1997), 1, photocopied.

16.National Park Service, Washington, D.C., 4 March 1997, Transcript in the hand of Tony Wrenn, American Institute of Architects, Washington, D.C.

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