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# How Mission 66 Shaped the Visitor Experience at National Parks

By:

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## The Flamingo Visitors Center at Everglades National Park.

Visitation to national parks skyrocketed in the years following World War II. And with the onslaught of visitors came the need for better visitor services. So the [National Park Service](https://www.nps.gov/index.htm) [Link: <https://www.nps.gov/index.htm>] devised an ambitious 10-year plan to repair and modernize park infrastructure. They called the plan “[Mission 66](http://www.mission66.com/) [Link: <http://www.mission66.com/>].” The efforts began in 1955 and were set to end in 1966—the National Park Service’s 50th anniversary.

Through this federally sponsored program, more than \$1 billion was spent to rehabilitate hundreds of existing buildings; to build thousands of miles of new roads; to build hundreds of new restroom facilities, campgrounds, and picnic areas; and, perhaps most noticeably, to build more than 100 new visitor centers. Many of those visitor centers still stand today, as emblems to the Park Service’s signature Park Service Modern style.

In the [Winter 2017 issue](/preservation-magazine/issues/winter-2017) [Link: </preservation-magazine/issues/winter-2017>] of [Preservation](/preservation-magazine) [Link: </preservation-magazine>] magazine, we profiled one of these Mission 66 projects—the [Painted Desert Community Complex](/stories/painted-desert-community-complex-returns-to-modernist-roots) [Link: </stories/painted-desert-community-complex-returns-to-modernist-roots>] at Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona, a sprawling, 22-acre compound designed by Richard Neutra in the 1960s, complete with places for visitors to shop, eat, and learn about the park, as well as meeting spaces, staff housing, a maintenance facility, and a school for the children of park employees.

Here, we take a look at a few more of those funky, Modernist Mission 66 facilities at national park sites across the country.





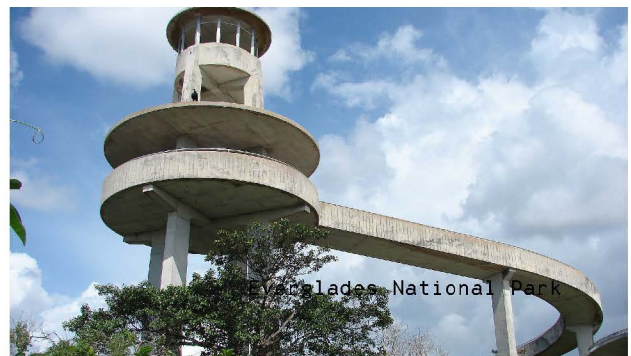


The second-story breezeway at the Flamingo Visitor Center at  
Everglades National Park

## Everglades National Park— Florida

[Everglades National Park](https://www.nps.gov/ever/index.htm) [Link:  
<https://www.nps.gov/ever/index.htm>]  
claims two Mission 66 projects: the  
Flamingo Visitor Center and Shark  
Valley Observation Tower.

[Flamingo Visitor Center](https://www.nps.gov/ever/planyourvisit/flamdirections.htm) [Link:  
<https://www.nps.gov/ever/planyourvisit/flamdirections.htm>]  
looks just as its name suggests: It's  
bright pink, and much of it is on stilts. It  
was designed in the early 1960s by  
Cecil John Doty, one of the National  
Park Service's most prolific designers.  
The covered breezeway on the second



Shark Valley Observation Tower  
at Everglades National Park

level gives visitors a place to sit and look out over Florida Bay.

In the northern part of the park, there's the [Shark Valley Observation Tower](https://www.nps.gov/ever/learn/nature/scenicvistas.htm) [Link: <https://www.nps.gov/ever/learn/nature/scenicvistas.htm>] , which offers visitors a 360-degree view of the River of Grass. The concrete structure looks positively Space Age, with its curving ramps and flat, disc-like roofs, all held up by thin columns.

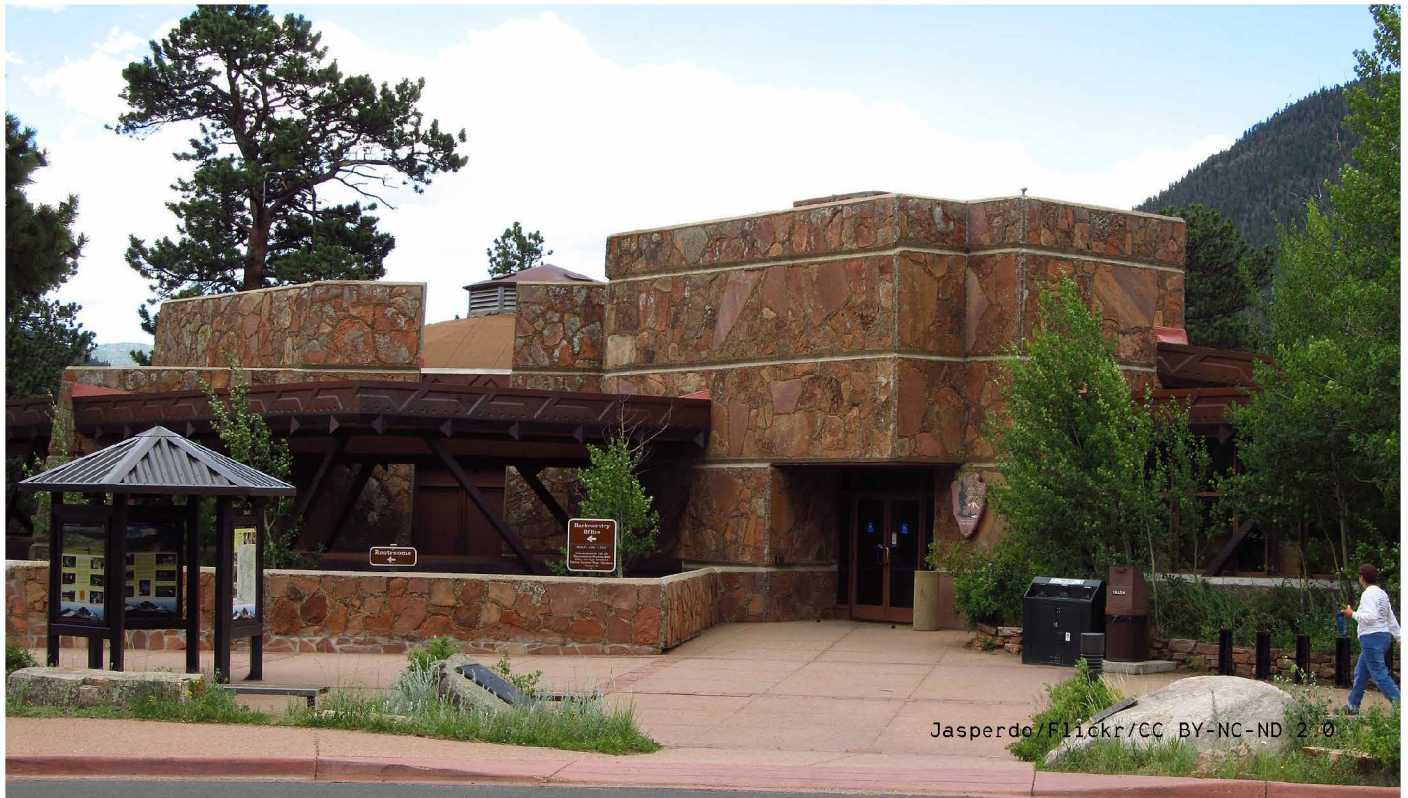


Ben Reifel Visitor Center at Badlands National Park

## Badlands National Park—South Dakota



The Ben Reifel Visitor Center at [Badlands National Park](https://www.nps.gov/badl/index.htm) [Link: <https://www.nps.gov/badl/index.htm>] is a simple structure, with a flat roof and tall windows. It was designed by the firm Cecil Doty and Lucas, Craig, Whitwam and constructed between 1957 and 1958. It's undergone some renovations, and today it features several interactive exhibits, an air-conditioned theater, and a bookstore.



Beaver Meadows Visitor Center at Rocky Mountain National Park

## Rocky Mountain National Park—Colorado

Taliesin Associated Architects, the architectural group founded by Frank Lloyd Wright, designed Beaver Meadows Visitor Center at [Rocky Mountain National Park](https://www.nps.gov/romo/index.htm) [Link: <https://www.nps.gov/romo/index.htm>]. Wright's influence is obvious. The building, constructed between 1965 and 1966, blends in with its surrounding landscape; it's built with native materials, such as sandstone; it features large expanses of glass and a flat, horizontal roofline; and inside, there's an open floor plan and lots of natural light.



Today, it offers a classic visitor center experience, with an introductory film, lots of maps, an on-hand ranger, a gift shop, and restrooms.



Clingmans Dome Observation Tower at Great Smoky Mountains National Park

## Great Smoky Mountains National Park—North Carolina and Tennessee

Two structures at [Great Smoky Mountains National Park](https://www.nps.gov/grsm/index.htm) [Link: <https://www.nps.gov/grsm/index.htm>] hail from the Mission 66 era.



First, there's Sugarlands Visitor Center, which was built in 1960. It was fully renovated a few years ago, adding new interpretive exhibits, improved museum space, and a new information desk.

Sugarlands Visitor Center at  
Great Smoky Mountains National  
Park

At 6,643 feet, Clingmans Dome is the highest peak in the park. At the summit of the dome, there's [Clingmans Dome Observation Tower](https://www.nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/clingmansdome.htm) [Link: <https://www.nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/clingmansdome.htm>]. The structure was built in 1959. It's a steep, half-mile walk to the top of the 54-foot tower. Once there, though, you'll get panoramic views of the Smokies and beyond.



Lauren Walser is the Los Angeles-based field editor of Preservation magazine. She enjoys writing and thinking about art, architecture, and public space, and hopes to one day restore her very own Arts and Crafts-style bungalow.