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## Rustic Trailside Museums and Modern Visitor Centers: America's Most Popular Museums

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This paper focuses on two types of museums designed by the National Park Service: the trailside museum of the 1920s and the visitor center of the 1950s. The visitor center is arguably the country's most popular museum type, providing public information and education throughout the country in places as different as highway rest areas, private attractions, public universities, and the nation's most celebrated natural wonders. As I will show, the rustic trailside museum was a prototype for the visitor center, in terms of establishing the interactive educational role of park museums that we experience today.

The first museum documented in a national park was a 1904 arboretum at Yosemite, and over the next two decades the staffs at several parks—Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Mount Rainier—were slowly building collections of artifacts and natural specimens that they housed wherever room was available. By the early 1920s, the Yosemite museum had been moved to a former artist's studio, and park naturalist Ansel Hall was working to find funding for a new building. In 1924, the American Association of Museums (AAM) secured grants through the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial to fund a museum at Yosemite. Designed by Herbert Maier, a young California architect, the museum closely resembled the park administration building, which was in a style that would come to be known as “Park Service Rustic.”<sup>21</sup>

The Park Service Rustic style is characterized by the use of native materials, the desire for architectural simplicity reminiscent of pioneer craftsmen, and an implied association with the landscape. The Yosemite Museum featured a ground floor that appeared to be of rugged granite boulders, but was actually fire-resistant concrete, and the second story was covered with darkly stained shingles. Although the building was designed to employ contemporary construction methods, the style suggests a connection with the past and with the natural surroundings (Figure 1).

The Yosemite Museum met with the approval of the American Association of Museums, which received additional funding from the Rockefeller Memorial to expand the program of park museum construction. A year after the completion of his Yosemite Museum, Maier became an agent of the AAM and, working out of Washington, D.C., designed two additional model museums: an observation station at Yavapai Point in Grand Canyon National Park and a trailside museum at Bear Mountain in the Palisades Interstate Park. For the Yavapai Point structure, Maier imitated the rustic style of architect Mary Jane Colter, who had already sited her Lookout Studio and Hermit's Rest on the south rim of the canyon. From the new museum, visitors could view the canyon through telescopes and learn about what they were seeing in interpretive exhibits.

At Bear Mountain, Maier took the idea of interacting with the landscape even further by creating the first “trailside” museum. Visitors followed a trail up the hill from the boathouse

that led right through the building. Actually building a museum on a path, and incorporating it into the park experience, was a key innovation that influenced the work of future Park Service architects, planners, and museum professionals. The idea of diminishing the barrier between the park and the museum—of considering the park itself as the museum—set Maier’s work apart from that of his contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> Over the next 40 years, the National Park Service would continue to develop an original type of museum that featured glass observation windows as well as glass cases.

With ongoing funding from the AAM, Maier used what he had learned at Bear Mountain to design four rustic trailside museums strategically situated along the Grand Loop road system of America’s largest and most popular national park: Yellowstone. From the beginning of the project, Yellowstone National Park was understood as a decentralized landscape with an assortment of interesting sights that demanded interpretation—an ideal situation for a series of trailside museums. The first museum, located at Old Faithful, was open by 1928, and three additional museums were constructed over the next three years.

The Madison Junction Museum appears to be sited on natural stone. The dark wood shingles, prominent use of rough logs, and alpine motif under the eaves are characteristic of Maier’s rustic buildings. The Norris Museum is a seemingly natural frame for the geyser basin, which suddenly comes into view as one enters the hallway. Patterns of rock and wood continue outside the buildings, as terraces invite visitors to treat the outdoors like additional museum space. Fishing Bridge features massive boulder foundations, in which the stones seem to be heaped in natural piles; the log posts were carefully selected for their grains and knots. As a group, Maier’s buildings were the first to use architecture to direct visitors toward the park landscape. The museums not only offered typical interpretive exhibits, but also a physical space that directly related to the park itself.

One important component in Yellowstone’s scenic loop, the nature shrine, was a compact version of the new trailside museum. Obsidian Cliffs nature shrine, created in 1931, stands at the edge of a parking lot in front of a two-mile-long mountain of volcanic glass. Like the museums, the shrine is constructed of local materials—in this case the very glass under examination in the featured interpretive exhibit. By providing the scenic Grand Loop with an itinerary of geological and biological education, Maier’s museum system helped establish

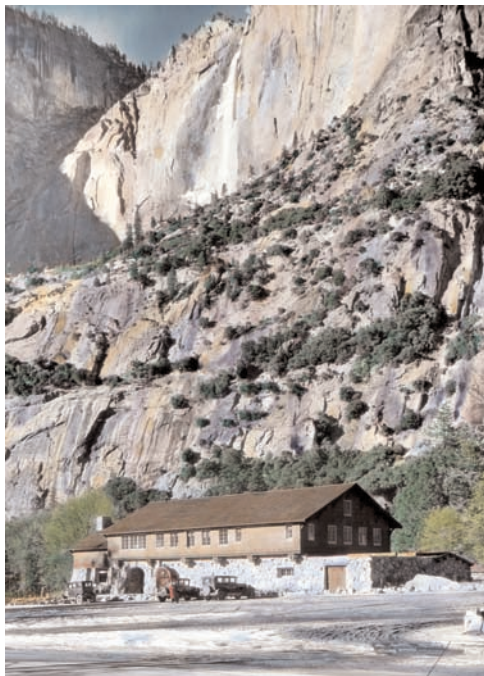


Figure 1. Newly constructed Yosemite museum building with Yosemite Falls in the background, 1925. Photo courtesy of Yosemite National Park (YOSE 50110).

the educational role of national and state parks. The new museum type improved the views of specific natural landscapes by adding layers of scientific and aesthetic interpretation for the public to appreciate.

The Depression and World War II took a huge toll on the nation's parks; as late as 1949, Park Service Director Newton Drury called the parks "victims of war." Although visitation increased dramatically after the war, the Park Service was still relying on rustic facilities like those I've mentioned. During the early 1950s, the Park Service began to confront its problems with in-house designs for public use buildings, the prototype for the modern visitor center. The public use building took the unprecedented step of grouping museum services together with administrative functions. Early public use buildings at Grand Canyon and Everglades national parks, conceived before Mission 66, were retrospectively called "visitor centers."

In 1955, Conrad Wirth, director of the National Park Service, introduced a bold new program to rebuild the nation's parks. He called it Mission 66, and received a ten-year budget from Congress to make it work. The architectural cornerstone of Mission 66 was a new building type: the visitor center, a building designed as the center of public services and usually the center of each park's developed area. From their conception, visitor centers were designed to represent innovation: they were modern buildings with state-of-the-art services. The new building type attracted the public with a variety of services, and sprinkled interpretive exhibits throughout frequently traveled areas—particularly the lobby—as well as within areas designated "museum." It was possible to spend time in a visitor center learning about a park without ever consciously entering a museum.<sup>3</sup>

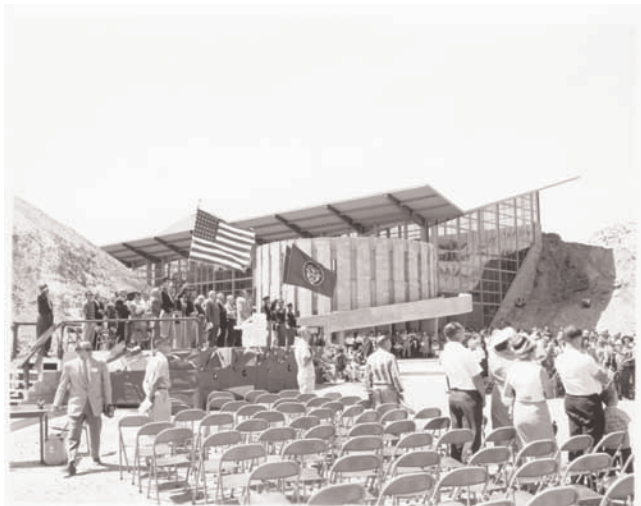
The visitor center at Zion National Park, opened in 1960, is a typical example. The path from the parking lot leads to a broad front terrace from which visitors enter the hexagon-shaped lobby oriented toward scenic views. A central skylight illuminates the room. An information desk stands to the left of the skylight between the entrances to the exhibit space and auditorium. Visitors were encouraged to walk out to the exterior viewing terrace to the Towers of the Virgin, a rock formation behind the building. A certain progression through the building was suggested, and visitors interacted with different types of museum exhibits in the lobby and outdoors, as well as within the room designated for that purpose.

Although most visitor centers were relatively modest buildings with programs similar to others I've described, a small number were spectacular. Dinosaur National Monument's Quarry Visitor Center is a national historic landmark (NHL) in the dry, rocky terrain of northeast Utah, over 200 miles from any major city. Here, the National Park Service demonstrated the power of their building type by transforming a barren pile of fossil bones into a modern wonder.

When Quarry Visitor Center was designed in 1956, the building was hailed as a precedent for things to come (Figure 2). Park Service Director Conrad Wirth acknowledged that his "bold move" would result in a "world-renowned" building and "attract thousands of people." The San Francisco architectural firm Anshen and Allen was commissioned to design the visitor center. A concrete ramp takes the visitor up to the second-story viewing deck for an up-close view of dinosaur remains emerging from the living rock. When the visitor center first opened, visitors could watch paleontologists chip away at the rock matrix to

Figure 2. Dedication ceremony at Quarry Visitor Center, Dinosaur National Monument, 1958. Photo courtesy of National Park Service Historic Photograph Collection, Harpers Ferry Center (HPC-000141).

reveal the gigantic fossilized bones. The lower part of the rock face is viewed from the first floor, where visitors could also see the scientists working in the laboratory. The “museum” portion of the building is a steel-frame structure with an asymmetrical butterfly roof; the ends of the “shed” protecting the bones are glass panels providing natural light. Visitor services are contained within a concrete cylindrical tower adjacent the viewing area. But Quarry Visitor Center used modern technology to do what no other architectural style could: protect the precious dinosaur remains while illuminating them with natural light.



A brief look at two additional NHL visitor centers illustrates how visitor centers were designed to enhance site interpretation.

The Wright Brothers National Memorial visitor center in Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, was designed in the late 1950s by the Philadelphia architects Mitchell/Giurgula. The building sits on a platform and visitors enter from a terrace with a textured concrete motif. Along with a regular museum area, the visitor center features an assembly room with window walls overlooking the “first flight area.” It is sited so that all major points of interest can be seen from this room.

The headquarters at Beaver Meadows, Rocky Mountain National Park, was designed by Taliesin Associated Architects, the successor firm to Frank Lloyd Wright, in the early 1960s. The building is sited to sit low in the landscape; employees enter a two-story administration building, but the visitor center is only one story from the public entrance. The walls are actually made of 101 concrete panels in 64 sizes with stones laid into the cast concrete and a structural steel truss system. A viewing balcony encircles the building and one section frames Long’s Peak, the highest mountain in the park.

Despite dramatically different architectural styles, the rustic trailside museum and the modern visitor center share many characteristics that set them apart from other museums. In most cases, aspects of the park are part of the building, whether a river boulder or a stunning view. Often, the buildings are sited at an important park location—near the geyser no one wants to miss or overlooking the battlefield that is the reason for the building. In partnership with the American Association of Museums, the Park Service developed two new building types that forever altered the way we view some of our most treasured natural landscapes and most valued historic sites.

## Endnotes

1. The early history of Park Service museums is summarized in the first two chapters of Ralph H. Lewis, *Museum Curatorship in the National Park Service 1904–1982* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, Curatorial Services Division, 1993).
2. For a more detailed description and assessment of Maier’s work in the context of his day, see Ethan Carr, *Wilderness by Design: Landscape Architecture and the National Park Service* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 143–145.
3. For a history of Mission 66 visitor centers, including five case studies, see Sarah Allaback, *Mission 66 Visitor Centers, The History of a Building Type* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2000).