

***Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma***  
**Ethan Carr. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007.**

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Leisure and recreation have rich histories that can provide a critical basis for understanding current and future issues in the field. Yet for whatever reasons, evidence of a significant commitment to historical scholarship within the leisure and recreation field is hard to find. This is certainly not the case in landscape architecture, forestry, geography, and planning. Each of these allied fields has developed a community of scholars, journals, and book publishers interested in history, and within the past two decades the sub-discipline of environmental history has come into full blossom. All have contributed work relevant to leisure and recreation history in recent years, of which Ethan Carr's book, *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma*, stands out as an excellent example. Published in association with the non-profit Library of American Landscape History, the press and its author have their footing in landscape architecture, yet the focus of the book places it squarely within the purview of leisure researchers, teachers, students, and practitioners. Carr demonstrates rigorous historical scholarship and his engaging narrative and generous use of period photographs and other illustrations make it an enjoyable as well as informative lesson in recreation history.

The book addresses a critical period of outdoor recreation planning in the United States when the pastoral ideals of park design and use crashed head on with the post World War II baby boom. Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted's 1865 report on Yosemite Valley established the early philosophical basis for national parks, a populist conception further codified by son Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.'s wording of the National Park Service Act of 1916 that tied preservation and public enjoyment of the nation's foremost natural and historic wonders together as a singular idea. Preservation for public enjoyment became the operative concept of Stephen Mather and others who directed national park system development in its formative years, and conflict between providing for both preservation and use in a way that would, in the Act's language, leave parks "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations" was not yet apparent. Rustic, "country place" architecture and primitive road developments proliferated through the massive public works programs of the Depression years, but it wasn't until after World War II that park directors looked up to see what was coming down the road. It was people in their cars and plenty of them, and the National Park Service (NPS) had neither the program nor the funding to handle them.

This "National Park Dilemma," voiced first by NPS Director Newton Drury in the mid-1940s, would become the chief problem faced by succeeding Director Conrad Wirth. And while *Mission 66* is ostensibly about Wirth's solution to the problem, Carr's engaging story is as much a portrait of the man driven to succeed in a changing world as it is a description and critical analysis of the program itself. Carr divides the book's ten chapters into three sections concerned with Mission 66 planning, design, and construction. To me, these headings do not accurately capture the content of the chapters

therein, and those considering the book for reference might pass over important material about and beyond the program itself, including national park philosophy, the history of outdoor recreation planning, and the politics of wilderness preservation. For example, Chapter 6 in the section on design presents a fascinating description of the innovations made in historical preservation policy and environmental interpretation, achievements Carr rightly concludes may be more significant than the physical legacy of development most associate with Mission 66.

Section I describes the main events and actors who influenced national park development from its origins up to the rollout of the Mission 66 program in 1956. Chapter 1 establishes the roots of the dilemma; while Mather and his early hires fought hard to protect the parks against dams and resource extraction, the impacts of increasing recreation use were less fully anticipated. But as the postwar “floodgates of travel” opened to the parks, it became clear that something different needed to happen. In Chapter 2 we are introduced to the “Mather men” of the central design office in Washington, DC, career professionals who built Park Service planning capacity to a force unequalled in the nation. Chief among them were Wirth, who joined the Washington office in 1931 as chief land planner and would assume the director’s position in 1951, and Thomas Vint, who joined the service in 1923 and in 1931 became chief landscape architect responsible for architectural and landscape design service-wide. The combination of Wirth’s planning and Vint’s design skills made them an effective team, and in a concentrated effort that drew together the forces of NPS planners and supervisors at all levels, they crafted and convincingly packaged Mission 66 as an urgent national priority: A 10-year, billion dollar mission to upgrade park facilities and programs to address the national park dilemma, completed in time to celebrate NPS’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Their program, while built solidly upon the national park philosophies of Olmsted, Mather, and others, took on a distinctively modernist sensibility, and in Chapters 3 and 4, Carr’s incisive analysis of Mission 66 within the lens of modernism is a major contribution to historical scholarship in the recreation and leisure field. Modernism as a cultural movement embraced technological and social changes occurring around the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and by the end of World War II it had become a potent force in urban and regional planning. It reshaped the American landscape with bedroom suburbs, shopping centers, and other discrete land uses connected by an auto-oriented transportation network that favored speed over community, and it viewed humans as alienated from nature. For Wirth and Vint, modernism provided a technological solution to the national park dilemma: One could use modernist ideas of planning to accommodate increasing amounts of park users without impairing the resource or people’s enjoyment of it. With high-speed highway networks leading into them, national parks could be reconceived as the day-use areas most visitors already treated them as. Overnight accommodations could be moved to gateway communities outside park boundaries as could park employee housing and operations buildings. This would lessen the development footprint within parks, preserving the pristine wilderness backcountry and concentrating necessary development in less fragile frontcountry areas. The increasingly familiar suburban shopping center would serve as a template for frontcountry development, and a major new park structure called the visitor center would anchor food service, restroom, and, where necessary, motel-style lodging facilities, all surrounded by plenty of convenient parking. The visitor center

would serve as locus for a significantly upgraded interpretive program, with informative staff and engaging slide shows that would teach people how to appreciate and use the parks without destroying them. An improved but not necessarily expanded road network would move people efficiently through the park, spreading out use both geographically and seasonally.

Sections II and III describe how these precepts of Mission 66 planning were implemented through design and construction. Carr provides a balanced analysis, sometimes corroborating other authors' largely negative appraisals of the program but also praising Mission 66 for its often-forgotten accomplishments and innovations. For anyone who, like me, has ever wondered how the Park Service came to design such brutally modern visitor centers and lodges, chapter 5 provides an explanation that will lead you to new insights and, if not appreciation, then at least sympathy for the problems faced by the designers. Chapter 6 on interpretation and preservation has already been mentioned and for those interested in these aspects of leisure studies it is a must read. Chapter 7 on landscape was less illuminating for me than the two other design chapters; while the Mission 66 program itself can be rightfully viewed as a major achievement of 1950s landscape design, the planning aspects of the Mission 66 program are already covered in Section I and park roads are covered in Section III. Other aspects of landscape design are of smaller significance: modernism viewed backcountry wilderness as largely hands off to design and planning, and except for a few new urban parks like the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, there was little innovation happening at the site scale.

While the public may have been put-off by the modernist look of the visitor centers, their aesthetic sensibilities did not prevent them from using the centers, which soon became a very popular and accepted part of national park infrastructure. The end result was much less happy for park concession and road development, and as discussed in Chapters 8 and 9, as Mission 66 progressed, park stakeholders and the general public increasingly viewed the program as a misguided attempt to develop the national parks for mass, unrestricted use. Carr agrees with this assessment insofar as he feels Wirth uncritically accepted that modernist planning ideas could preserve wilderness even as use increased-- Wirth and those that came before him failed to recognize that overuse could itself be a major form of impairment, both ecologically and socially. But Carr also demonstrates that the downfall of Mission 66 came not only as a result of false modernist assumptions but also from the politics of park development and preservation. At the local level, politicians often lobbied against the Mission 66 precept of removing and relocating park infrastructure, resulting in overdevelopment of lodging "villages" with low occupancy rates. More significantly, however, was the growing concern about the environment at the national level, and controversies over park road construction led to a major shift in national park development policies. Critiques of the program by the Sierra Club's David Brower and Interior Secretary Stewart Udall of the new Kennedy administration soon marginalized Wirth and made Mission 66 seem as outdated as the bulbous 1950s sedans shown clogging park roads in photos of the era included in Carr's book.

This paradigmatic policy shift had a major impact in the passage of the Wilderness Act, and wilderness scholars may find Carr's description of this inadvertent outcome of Mission 66 insightful. But it also led to Wirth's reinventing "a second stage" of Mis-

sion 66 aimed at national park expansion and diversification, and Chapter 10's "Parks for America" title captures what Carr describes as perhaps the most enduring legacies of the program. These acquisitions included significant typological and geographic expansions of the national park system including lakeshores and seashores at a time when they were being rapidly developed for private use, and national recreation areas that increased access to open space in urban and urban proximate areas. Wirth also reprised his early career interest in national level recreation planning and developed a Parks for America initiative, identifying lands for local, state, and federal acquisition that would be used by the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC).

An introductory chapter summarizes the essence of the book for those wanting a taste of this important era of recreation history, and could stand alone as a useful addition to a course reader on recreation planning. A concluding chapter brings together and expands upon the assessments of Mission 66 Carr gives throughout the main chapters. Here Carr argues that we should base final judgment of Mission 66 not only upon the merits of modernism as a design philosophy but also within the context of how the nature preservation and public enjoyment roles of national parks are interpreted by stakeholders.

The balance of these roles continues to shift with time, and Carr's book comes at a critical juncture in our own time where pressure to strengthen the system's ecological mission may make it easier to downplay the recreational mission of national parks, especially in the face of low budgets and flat or declining use. As NPS approaches its centennial year, how might a "Mission 2016" interpret the knotty issues of preservation and enjoyment? Despite its problems, Mission 66 attempted to address the humanistic aspects of national park policy in proactive ways, and Carr's discussion of this important chapter in the history of recreation planning provides clues to how we might build future constituencies for national parks and other public lands. On a more academic level, Carr's work also provides us with impetus to build our own capacity for historical scholarship in leisure and recreation, for there are many contemporary problems that can benefit from such a temporal perspective.