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Flying Saucer of the Smokies: The Debate Over National Park Architecture and Wilderness Values in Clingmans Dome Observation Tower

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Flying Saucer of the Smokies: The Debate over National Park Architecture and
Wilderness Values in Clingmans Dome Observation Tower

By

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Abstract

Clingmans Dome Observation Tower sits on the highest point in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It was constructed in 1959 as part of a ten-year project called Mission 66. Although Mission 66 is a critical component of National Park history, most people are unaware it happened. This thesis will use criticism of Clingmans Dome Observation Tower to demonstrate that critiques of Modern architectural style within the National Parks was a proxy for conflict about interpretations of wilderness and how National Parks should be used. The architectural style from this era is called Park Service Modern, and it was widespread and controversial. Conservation groups, like the National Parks Association, criticized modern designs in the parks because they believed the style did not harmonize with the scenery and purpose of the parks. This paper will show how negative opinions about Park Service Modern were tied to fear of park development. The aesthetic preference of conservationists is not in and of itself connected to the sustainability of the designs and materials, but, rather, it is connected to the representation of urban spaces in wilderness. By looking at the design, construction, and response of Clingmans Dome Observation Tower, within the context of park architectural history and the concept of wilderness at the time, it is clear that the contention over architectural style in the parks is rooted in a disagreement over the use and purpose of the National Parks. Clingmans Dome Observation Tower sits at the crux of the conflict: accessibility and wilderness.

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List of Abbreviations

GRSM	Great Smoky Mountains National Park
NPA	National Parks Association
<i>NPM</i>	<i>National Parks Magazine</i>
NPS	National Park Service
The Tower	Clingmans Dome Observation Tower

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Should we build today like Daniel Boone built, or build like Daniel would build if he were alive today?” So asked Hubert Bebb in his rebuttal to *National Parks Magazine*’s scathing review of his design for Clingmans Dome Observation Tower.¹ His response joined a public debate over the tower, which was assembled in 1959 on the highest peak along the Appalachian Trail in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The design and construction of Clingmans Dome Observation Tower (the Tower) was part of a ten-year National Park Service (NPS) program called Mission 66. Like many projects constructed for the program, the Tower generated mixed reviews. Though it was unanimously endorsed by the NPS, many conservationists published vehement criticisms of the Tower, complaining about its “flashy and conspicuous” Modernist design.²

Much of the Tower’s debate focused on what the NPS and the National Parks Association (NPA), publisher of *National Parks Magazine* (NPM), deemed appropriate architecture. Their differing perspectives on design related to what each organization thought the purpose of the National Parks should be. The crux of their opinions rested on interpretations of what it meant to preserve wilderness. Because the Tower is located

¹ Hubert Bebb, “To Board of Trustees National Parks Magazine,” February 27, 1959, 2, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome History 1 of 2 Box 2 Folder 68, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

² Anthony Wayne Smith, “A ‘Sky-Post’ for the Smokies,” *National Parks Magazine*, February 1959, 3, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome Tower Correspondence February 1958 Box 2 Folder 64, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

within a large wilderness area, it is an excellent example of how architectural conflict reflects wilderness conservation disputes. Central to its story are the contradicting views on what the value of National Parks is, what they should be used for, and how to best protect park wilderness. This thesis will utilize the narrative of Clingmans Dome Observation Tower to show that debates over the appropriateness of modern architectural styles within the Park System were a proxy for a larger debate over construction and development in wilderness areas, that had existed since the founding of the NPS and the Organic Act. A secondary goal of this research is to show that, while aesthetic preferences are valid concerns in such disputes, the NPA's fundamental criticism of the Tower from a conservation perspective stemmed from an incomplete understanding of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park's infrastructural needs. That is, they failed to understand that the park would not be able to withstand the increasing number of people visiting in automobiles unless they made changes to the park.

The most significant study of Mission 66 architectural history was written by landscape architectural historian Ethan Carr, who offers an overview of architecture developed for the Mission 66 program in *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma*. His work will provide the basis for understanding park architecture, along with another foundational Mission 66 architectural history, *Mission 66 Visitors Centers: The History of a Building Type*, by architectural historian Sarah Allaback.³ In her book, Allaback describes the architectural inspiration, planning, construction, and feedback of specific park visitor centers as a reflection of the Mission 66 architectural experience.

³ Sarah Allaback, *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of A Building Type* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 2000) 5.

Often structures erected for Mission 66 were based on a style dubbed “Park Service Modern.”⁴ Architecture of that type was a drastic change from the previous rustic design, sometimes called “Park Service Rustic,” which evoked the nostalgia of the American frontier through its use of logs, stone, and steel. As Allaback summarizes, “the pseudo-vernacular imagery and rough-hewn materials of this style conformed with the artistic conventions of landscape genres, and therefore constituted ‘appropriate’ architectural elements in the perceived scene.”⁵ Though Park Service Rustic used seemingly natural, local materials, they were not necessarily related to any existing local architectural styles. The NPS realized this and concluded that different forms of architecture would not betray any local cultural tradition. The transition to Park Service Modern, with its smooth walls, concrete, and innovative fenestration, sparked disdain from conservationists.

This thesis will similarly discuss design, construction, and critical response surrounding Mission 66 architecture. However, this paper most directly parallels the approach of historic preservationist Kelly Marie Christensen, who connects Mission 66 to the environmental movement and wilderness values of the 1950s-1960s. She examines projects in Denali National Park and Preserve, Olympic National Park, and Crater Lake National Park that were received with harsh criticism, much like the Tower.⁶ Christensen notes that, “research has only scratched the surface concerning the complicated history of wilderness, the environment, and Mission 66.” She notes that there could be further work

⁴ “National Register of Historic Places, Clingmans Dome Observation Tower, At the Terminus of Clingmans Dome Road, Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GRSM), National Register #12000515,” 2012, 13.

⁵ Allaback, *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of A Building Type*, 23.

⁶ Kelly Marie Christensen, “Wilderness Values, the Environmental Movement and Mission 66,” PhD diss., (University of Oregon, 2011), 2.

done on Mission 66 and the politics between the NPS and recreation planning, the NPS and other partner organizations, and on historic preservation of Modern architecture in cultural landscapes. Accordingly, I will present original research on the Tower, which involves aspects of recreation planning due to its location as well as shows the relationships between Great Smoky Mountains National Park and local chapters of partner organizations such as branches of the NPA and the Wilderness Society.⁷ Recreating the narrative of the Tower's development will additionally provide a place for the preservation of modern architecture, since the Tower was minorly refurbished years after its original completion, and so is a good example of architecture from the Mission 66 period.

To connect architectural criticism with conservationist criticism, I draw on the research of historians like John Miles and Richard Sellars, who wrote extensively on National Park history, National Parks Association history, environmental design, and preservation. Their work shows the changing values of the environmental movement that evolved during the '66 era and actively responded to NPS projects.⁸ Miles' books, *Guardians of the Parks: A History of the National Parks and Conservation Association*, and *Wilderness in National Parks: Playground of Preserve* explain the relationship between the National Park Service, the National Parks Association, and wilderness preservation. According to Miles, nineteenth century naturalists defined wilderness as

⁷ Christensen, 104-105.

⁸ Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 5.

“the absence of extensive and permanent modification of the natural landscape.”⁹ These naturalists believed that such lands existed and needed to be saved from development.

Conflict between those who wanted to use parks’ natural resources and those who wanted to save land for its natural beauty came to a head in 1908 with the Hetch Hetchy controversy: a debate over whether or not to construct a dam that would provide water to the San Francisco area, or to preserve wilderness.¹⁰ In part because of that controversy, the federal government decided that an organization to manage designated park lands was needed so the National Park Service was formed in 1916. The legislation that formed the Park Service was called the “Organic Act,” however it is also identified by the term “contradictory mandate.” In his article “Revisiting the Meaning and Purpose of the ‘National Park Service Organic Act,’” John Lemons argues that the act contained language which resulted in differing interpretations of how the National Parks should be used, and the wilderness within park territory should be preserved. According to the “contradictory mandate” the purpose of the NPS was “to conserve the scenery and wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Much of

⁹ John C. Miles, *Wilderness in National Parks: Playground of Preserve* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2009), 4.

¹⁰ For further reading on the Hetch Hetchy controversy, see *Dam! Water, Power, Politics, and Preservation in Hetch Hetchy and Yosemite National Park*, by John W. Simpson, or “Conservationism vs. Preservationism: The “public interest” in the Hetch Hetchy Controversy,” by Christine Oravec.

the Tower's debate reflects the incongruent understanding of the mandate, the most common phrase cited being "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."¹¹

John Miles' work shows that, though the creation of the NPS began the process of regulating park wilderness, Congress did not give the Park Service specific preservation responsibilities until the Wilderness Act of 1964.¹² This was related to federal funding, which came from a desire to create public areas of natural beauty; essentially, the parks were designated as national tourist destinations. Consequently, Congress would not fund parks with areas that the public could not access, thus increasing the amount of infrastructure needed within the parks.¹³ This changed incrementally as public interest in wilderness preservation grew over time. Miles' work illustrates how access to automobiles greatly increased the number of park visitors, which conservationists believed would lead to the parks becoming more of a recreational commodity rather than an area of seclusion and peace.

As Sellars explains in his work *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History*, public New Deal funding contributed to the expansion and construction of national and state parks, but after WWII the parks' budget was severely diminished. Underfunding deepened the tension stemming from the "contradictory mandate." NPS director Newton Drury, who was fiscally conservative, opposed National Park expansion and thought National Parks should be limited to "premier scenic landscapes." He also had

¹¹ John Lemons, "Revisiting the Meaning and Purpose of the 'National Park Service Organic Act,'" *Environmental Management* 46, no. 1 (July 2010): 82, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00267-010-9488-0>.

¹² Miles, *Wilderness in National Parks: Playground of Preserve*, 4–9.

¹³ Miles, 10.

no interest in improving administration and increasing tourism in the parks.¹⁴ Ineffective at raising park funds, he believed that a smaller budget meant they could do less harm to the parks. Conveniently, he became director at a time of greatly reduced national parks funding. The operating budget was cut by more than half and the Civilian Conservation Corps, which provided much of its workforce, was terminated in 1942. At this point, the NPS became a “protection and maintenance” program.¹⁵

Shortly after Drury resigned in 1951, Conrad Wirth took over as director of the National Park Service. According to Sellars, Wirth’s views on park management were vastly different from his predecessor. He was distrustful of scientific research and believed that increased tourism would help preserve wilderness areas from damaging development like dams.¹⁶ Wirth thought that tourism was essential for public outreach and congressional support. He believed the best way to get the public involved in the parks was to develop their infrastructure. In 1956, he proposed a ten-year project, Mission 66, to expand, modernize, and renovate the NPS for its 50th anniversary. Passed by Congress, it resulted in a \$1 billion plan for the construction of thousands of miles of roads, hundreds of miles of trails, water, sewer, and electrical facilities, residences, administration buildings, stations for comfort and other purposes, and more than one-hundred visitors’ centers.¹⁷

¹⁴ Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History*, 149.

¹⁵ Sellars, 150–51.

¹⁶ Sellars, 180.

¹⁷ Ethan Carr, *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 10.

In addition to increasing visitor accessibility, Wirth believed that development was needed to keep visitors from misusing the park.¹⁸ He believed that infrastructural expansion, and Modern design, would direct and contain the flow of automobile and pedestrian traffic so that visitors would limit their damage in natural areas. As a result of the dramatic increase in construction projects, the NPS hired a large architectural and engineering workforce. William Carnes, Wirth's chief landscape architect, commented that the parks were the "largest single user of landscape architects in the country-possibly in the world."¹⁹ In 1954, Thomas Vint, a well-respected NPS architect and landscape architect, opened new central offices: the Eastern and Western Offices of Design and Construction. By 1961 he controlled a staff of over 400 employees.²⁰ The Tower's architect was just one of these many workers. His design was caught in the crosshairs of a new phase of reaction to the "contradictory mandate." The postwar growth of wilderness advocacy and Mission 66 set the stage for the Tower's criticism.

¹⁸ Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History*, 181–83.

¹⁹ Sellars, 184.

²⁰ Sellars, 184–85.

Chapter 2: Design and Construction of the Tower



Figure 2.1 *Aerial photograph of Clingman's Dome (T.N.), 1925*

To consider the design of the Tower, one must first look at the location.

Clingmans Dome Observation Tower straddles the Tennessee-North Carolina border on Clingmans Dome. At 6,643 ft, the top of the mountain is the highest point in the Great Smoky Mountains [see fig. 2.1].²¹ Before the park had even been established, the NPS found it necessary to construct a tower to serve as a lookout point for visitors. Clingmans Dome was a popular destination because of its proximity to major roads and its excellent

²¹ National Park Service, "Mission 66 for Great Smoky Mountains National Park" (Department of the Interior, 1956), 176, II.A.5.A D18 Master Plan-Mission 66 Edition (Vol. I) (1of2) 1956 Box A8 Folder 84, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

views of the mountain range. Its high volume of visitors meant that the site had to respond to changing park demands. As a result, towers were present on the peak long before the 1959 structure was erected.



Figure 2.2 *Ground view of Clingmans Dome Tower, Tennessee*²²

²² *Ground View of Clingmans Dome Tower, Tennessee*, n.d., Photograph, n.d., Open Parks Network, accessed October 13, 2021.



Figure 2.3 *Third level view to second level, Clingmans Dome Tower, Tennessee*²³

The first tower was built in the late 1920s for both visitors and fire watch use. In 1937, the Civilian Conservation Corp built a new structure from large timbers in concrete footings [see figs. 2.2 and 2.3]. The modest scale of the structure and selection of materials was common in Civilian Conservation Corp designs and reflected the Park Service Rustic aesthetic. At the same time, the NPS also created a new road that provided better public access to it. For safety reasons, the Civilian Conservation Corp tower was dismantled in 1950. The Tower location was easily accessible by the Appalachian Trail,

²³ *Third Level View to Second Level, Clingmans Dome Tower, Tennessee*, n.d., Photograph, n.d., Open Parks Network, accessed October 13, 2021.

and a 7-mile scenic drive connects Newfound Gap to Clingmans Dome Road, terminating in a parking lot below the crest of the mountain. A half-mile walk leads from the parking lot to the Tower area. Because of the height of the foliage, a tower was essential for a vantage point.²⁴ From the Tower on the summit, a spectator can see up to one hundred miles. Without a tower the trail from the parking lot ended with a small grassy area surrounded by trees. The NPS decided a new tower with a different design was needed to withstand years of rain and accommodate large numbers of people with varying degrees of physical capability.²⁵ This fell in line with Wirth's vision of Mission 66, to attract visitors and control traffic.

In 1957, Hubert Clarence Bebb started designing a tower for potential commission. A native of Illinois, Hubert Bebb was trained in engineering at the University of Colorado, and in 1928 earned a Bachelor of Architecture degree from Cornell, which stemmed from the Beaux Arts tradition, and had a "heavy focus on rational planning and historic accuracy pertaining to style and form."²⁶ Though he came from a historically-centered design background, his work tended to reflect Modernism. During the 1940s Bebb traveled back and forth between Gatlinburg and the Chicago-based firm founded by fellow Cornell alumni, Armstrong, Furst & Tilton.²⁷ He moved to

²⁴ Jackson E. Price, "To David M. Hall," March 9, 1959, 13–14, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome History 1 of 2 Box 2 Folder 68, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

²⁵ "Upland Chronicles: Clingmans Dome Tower Was Designed for Functionality," *The Mountain Press*, May 22, 2015, Newsbank.

²⁶ Katherine A. Nash, "Tourism as Heritage: Uncovering Hubert Bebb's Tourist Vernacular in Gatlinburg," MA Thesis, (The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2009), 100.

²⁷ Susan Knowles, "To Cynthia Walton," September 10, 2008, 1–4, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome History 1 of 2 Box 2 Folder 68, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

Gatlinburg permanently in 1950, and soon after started an architecture practice.

Clingmans Dome Observation Tower was one of his first major commissions, but he would ultimately become one of the most influential architects in East Tennessee.

Bebb's firm, Community Tectonics, in Knoxville, TN, was founded in 1966 with the philosophy: "the art and science of creating structures which are both functional and visually pleasing."²⁸ This business model shows that Modern architects believed nature was compatible with Modernism. To them, shapes and materials did not have to mimic scenery to fit in natural spaces. Creating structures or buildings that were aesthetically appealing and directed pedestrians through them efficiently did not detract from wilderness. Community Tectonics inserted those ideas into their products for years, and the firm remains active in 2022. Bebb's motto for design echoes his personal aesthetic principles:

Since I have always been interested in city planning, using the word 'community' seemed natural, and then the word 'tectonics' means making things that are both beautiful and useful. The things that people use in the community should be as efficient as possible, yet we want them to look good too.²⁹

Bebb "was a very dedicated, artistic individual. He had a very strong community spirit that had a lot to do with the kind of organization [i.e., Community Tectonics] he developed," according to Tom Trotter, another local architect, who also noted that "Bebb brought a philosophy of conservation to everything he did." Bebb himself noted that he

²⁸ Nash, "Tourism as Heritage: Uncovering Hubert Bebb's Tourist Vernacular in Gatlinburg," 100.

²⁹ Anna Garber, "Bebb's Legacy Graces Mountains," *The Mountain Press*, October 5, 1984, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome History 1 of 2 Box 2 Folder 68, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

“always had the idea that man should be a conservator and leave the earth in a little better condition than when he came to it.” He emphasized that architecture should fit into the landscape and that local building materials should be used. While this echoes the theory behind Park Service Rustic, his designs often included the wide roof overhang and nontraditional fenestration, exemplified by his designs such as the Gatlinburg Chamber of Commerce building, and the city’s Civic Auditorium. When Bebb died in 1984, his ashes were scattered from the Tower, a testament to its importance to him.³⁰ Bebb’s interest in local businesses and tourism made him a safe choice for designing the Tower. He would have seen firsthand the amount of traffic and been able to anticipate the NPS’s needs.

In designing the tower, Bebb assessed the topography, forests and panoramic views of Clingmans Dome and discussed the location with park officials and visitors.³¹ Bebb wanted his design to reflect the forest itself, resulting in light gray concrete pillars that mimicked the white trunks of Fraser Firs. His plans clearly reflect his understanding that Modernism could compliment nature, and not necessarily negate it. The use of concrete to imitate natural features was a common design philosophy in Mission 66 structures. For instance, Richard Neutra’s and Robert Alexander’s Painted Desert Visitors Center uses stucco and concrete to reflect indigenous-style construction, which tend to disappear into the scenery. The Painted Desert Visitors Center used the interior space to guide foot traffic in specific directions, an idea also incorporated in the Tower’s design.³² The columns supported a spiral ramp that led to a platform the same height as the

³⁰ Knowles, “To Cynthia Walton,” September 10, 2008, 1–4.

³¹ *Aerial Photograph of Clingman’s Dome (T.N.), 1925*, n.d., Photograph, n.d., Open Parks Network, accessed October 13, 2021.

³² Allaback, *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of A Building Type*, 145–50.

preceding wooden structure.³³ The ramp would rise at a 12% grade, the same grade as the Clingmans Dome trail, to function as an extension of the trail. The original design incorporated both a stone tower to support the platform as well as concrete columns.³⁴

Bebb presented this design to the NPS's Eastern Office of Design and Construction, who found the ramp "rather playful, even romantic."³⁵ After receiving their endorsement, his design went with the Eastern Office's representative, John B. Cabot, who then presented it to Tom Vint and Chief Architect Dick Sutton. Once Cabot convinced them of the design's assets, the three of them discussed the project with Wirth. Unsure of the need for a ramp, Wirth suggested eliminating it and replacing it with a spiral staircase that wrapped around the stone tower. They persuaded him otherwise. The stone tower was substituted with a concrete column, possibly to keep costs down or to streamline the design. After that revision the Modern concept for the Tower was approved because it satisfied the functional and aesthetic needs of the park.³⁶

Once Bebb successfully earned the commission, his final plan for the observation tower included a platform 28 feet in diameter supported by a concrete column of eight feet in diameter. The base of this pier is reached by a free-standing spiral ramp supported on cylindrical columns of diminishing diameter as their height decreases from the

³³ Price, "To David M. Hall," March 9, 1959, 13–14.

³⁴ "National Register of Historic Places, Clingmans Dome Observation Tower, At the Terminus of Clingmans Dome Road, Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GRSM), National Register #12000515," 6–7.

³⁵ "National Register of Historic Places, Clingmans Dome Observation Tower, At the Terminus of Clingmans Dome Road, Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GRSM), National Register #12000515," 17–18.

³⁶ "National Register of Historic Places, Clingmans Dome Observation Tower, At the Terminus of Clingmans Dome Road, Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GRSM), National Register #12000515," 17–18.

platform [see fig. 2.4]. The Tower's other features include an aluminum pipe handrail, a circular canopy above the platform to provide shade, a flagstone terrace encircled by a stone block wall capped with concrete for seating, a storage shed under the beginning of the ramp, and grounding for lightning protection in the central column. The concrete surface was finished with a smooth parge coat. An "orientation panel" in the original design has since been modified.³⁷



Figure 2.4 Man with unsupported ramp in background, Clingmans Dome, Tennessee, 1959.

The transition from a wooden tower to a concrete structure represents the widespread construction and infrastructural changes inaugurated by Mission 66. Most buildings and structures for the program were made from concrete instead of wood and stone. The Tower was constructed of masonry and other durable materials selected for

³⁷ "National Register of Historic Places, Clingmans Dome Observation Tower, At the Terminus of Clingmans Dome Road, Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GRSM), National Register #12000515," 1–4.

strength, appearance, and low maintenance cost.³⁸ Precast and prefabricated sections lowered on-site construction time, thus protecting the forest from excessive construction damage. Off-site fabrication also enabled pieces to be built during the winter when inclement weather would otherwise slow the build time [see fig. 2.5-2.7].³⁹ The convenience and low cost of concrete were significant reasons the NPS decided to switch to Modern designs.



Figure 2.5 Partially constructed ramp forms placed between two columns, Clingmans Dome Tower, Tennessee, 1959.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Man with Unsupported Ramp in Background, Clingmans Dome, Tennessee, circa 1960*, n.d., Photograph, n.d., Open Parks Network, accessed October 13, 2021.

³⁹ “Upland Chronicles: Clingmans Dome Tower Was Designed for Functionality.”

⁴⁰ *Partially Constructed Ramp Forms Placed between Two Columns, Clingmans Dome Tower, Tennessee*, n.d., Photograph, n.d., Open Parks Network, accessed October 13, 2021.



Figure 2.6 Men constructing beginning of ramp, Clingmans Dome, Tennessee, 1959.⁴¹

⁴¹ *Men Constructing Beginning of Ramp, Clingmans Dome, Tennessee, circa 1960*, n.d., Photograph, n.d., Open Parks Network, accessed October 13, 2021.



Figure 2.7 Entrance to ramp from rotunda at base of tower, Clingmans Dome Tower, Tennessee, 1959.⁴²

Extensive use of concrete was a sharp contrast to the vernacular of parks before the 1950s. Though timber, stone, and steel were expensive materials to use, Park Service Rustic was the first significant architectural development within the park system. Developed in the 1920s, this style emphasized natural materials and associations with

⁴² *Entrance to Ramp from Rotunda at Base of Tower, Clingmans Dome Tower, Tennessee*, n.d., Photograph, n.d., Open Parks Network, accessed October 13, 2021.

nearby scenery. Essentially, “rustic” meant any building that resembled local natural features. This style was popularized in the 1930s by Civilian Conservation Corps designs. The Corps made well-maintained trails and trailside museums, and stone fountains and steps. These developments matched the landscape in terms of aesthetic appreciation. Buildings were made to fit aesthetically pleasing local natural features, like timber and rock. Essentially, Park Service Rustic design consisted of picturesque structures in a picturesque environment. This followed the park’s concept of preservation for aesthetic and experience value, but that ideology changed and, along with it, architectural style.

Park architectural design had to change to accommodate postwar park demands. Automobility brought in exponentially more visitors, which revived debate over whether the NPS should accommodate crowds or limit access. The NPS’s turn to Modernism was an attempt to control traffic, both automobile and pedestrian, in a way that would contain visitors. By the start of Mission 66, the need for change was urgent. The NPS expected visitor numbers to grow from 49 million in 1956 to 80 million in 1966. The actual number was closer to an astounding 127 million. Though these estimates were high, the NPS did not to limit the number of park visitors and implemented an “enjoyment without impairment” policy.⁴³ This was a daunting task that proved near impossible in practice. Park architecture needed to effectively direct visitors without damaging the scenery.

⁴⁴This goal was especially important at Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Mission 66 led to great changes in GRSN. This was primarily due to the location of the park itself, within 500 miles of one-half the United States’ entire population in

⁴³ Carr, *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma*, 127.

⁴⁴ Carr, 128.

1956. According to a report for Mission 66 in the park, the area had had “an unparalleled increase in visitation. In 1941, visitors totaled 1,310,101; in 1951, the figure was 1,945,100; in 1956 the total was just short of 3,000,000.”⁴⁵ An estimate for 1966 was 4,000,000.⁴⁶ With this unprecedented scale of visitation came several issues, most significantly traffic crowding. Location of the roads and trails was not the problem; they were actually well-positioned to give access to major highways and points of interest throughout the park. The trouble was the number of cars.⁴⁷

In 1953, 96% of visitors entered the park by car, while the rest arrived by bus or truck.⁴⁸ Traffic was seasonal: over half in just June, July, and August.⁴⁹ There were traffic jams during those months as well as weekends throughout the year. Bottlenecks at the two main park entrances in Gatlinburg and Oconaluftee, which upset locals. Additionally, a “spectacle such as when a mother bear with cubs appears on the road also results in a traffic obstruction.”⁵⁰ Because of traffic issues, access to GRSM became more limited. To solve the traffic problem, existing roads needed to change, and additional parking areas for points of interest needed to be constructed.⁵¹

To accommodate the necessary park developments, the NPS budget for Mission 66 at GRSM was over \$41,000,000. This sum went for construction and infrastructural improvements, especially roads and trails improvement.⁵² Outdated facilities were

⁴⁵ National Park Service, “Mission 66 for Great Smoky Mountains National Park,” 4.

⁴⁶ National Park Service, 4.

⁴⁷ National Park Service, 6.

⁴⁸ National Park Service, 171.

⁴⁹ National Park Service, 167.

⁵⁰ National Park Service, 5.

⁵¹ National Park Service, 5.

⁵² National Park Service, 9.

“replaced with physical improvements adequate for expected demands but so designed and located as to reduce the impact of public use on valuable and destructible features.” The park service repeatedly emphasized that there would be no major changes to the existing road system. They stated that because maintaining a wilderness quality to the park was their foremost concern, the enlargement of roads and trails would be minimal. Even with that claim, they still proposed some construction. Their position on construction highlights the controversial nature of the “contradictory mandate,” which failed to reconcile park development with wilderness preservation. However, GRSM emphasized that their projects were necessary to decrease traffic congestion, such as new alignments between roads, camp and picnic grounds, administrative areas.⁵³ Connecting roads to trails and scenic areas was also a key point of development. While Clingmans Dome Observation Tower was not part of the original Mission 66 plan for GRSM, it was later included as a way to improve the visitor experiences at existing sites. The Tower’s design followed a trend of prioritizing functionality and shifting attention away from the building and towards the environment, a concept that started shortly before Mission 66 began.

One of the most influential modern park designs was Grand Teton National Park’s Jackson Lake Lodge. Built in 1955 and designed by Gilbert Stanley Underwood, this lodge was one of the primary modern structures that established the development of Park Service Modern. Constructed with traditional modernist materials like stained concrete and walls of windows, Underwood’s design started a style movement that represented both continuity and change, including flat roof lines, high windows, concrete, and

⁵³ National Park Service, 2-6.

geometric massing. In Ethan Carr's words, the lodge's "spatial sequence upon entering the building and the importance of views of the surrounding landscape in that sequence were reminiscent of his [Underwood's] other lodges as were the earth tones and rough textures of the building materials."⁵⁴ The new lodge increased capacity for enjoyment while reducing visual intrusion.

Native trees concealed the parking lot, much like the trees on Clingmans Dome that partially obscure the ramp.⁵⁵ In terms of location, the lodge represents a central theme of Park Service Modern: centralized visitor centers that control the flow of pedestrian traffic and combine utilities and education. The conglomeration of these functions in visitor centers formed a novel building type.⁵⁶ Under GRSM's Mission 66 plan, two visitor centers were constructed to unify functionality, accessibility, and education. One was built to house natural history interpretation, and the other featured human history.⁵⁷ The lodge, and future structures like the Tower, were for different, new purposes that older building types could not accommodate. The 1950s NPS wanted to build, not for whimsy, but for service and change. Park Service Modern was an attempt to reinvent the National Parks to fit a postwar America reliant on automobiles.⁵⁸ However, environmentalists largely thought that there was a contradiction between the park philosophy on wilderness preservation and Park Service Modern designs.⁵⁹ This conflict stems from the "contradictory mandate" as it relates to the accessibility of wilderness. The "enjoyment

⁵⁴ Carr, *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma*, 130.

⁵⁵ Carr, 131.

⁵⁶ Allaback, *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of A Building Type*, 17.

⁵⁷ National Park Service, "Mission 66 for Great Smoky Mountains National Park," 7.

⁵⁸ Allaback, *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of A Building Type*, 22–23.

⁵⁹ Allaback, 12.

without impairment” for future generations clause implied that visitors should have open access to the parks, but the NPS needed to somehow limit the destruction of wilderness by those visitors. Environmentalists saw the growth of infrastructure as an invasion of man into wilderness spaces, or as an invitation to destroy wilderness. In the case of the Tower, the functionalist Modern design seemed to clash with 19th century preservationists’ romantic perception of how National Parks should be used.

Chapter 3: The Response

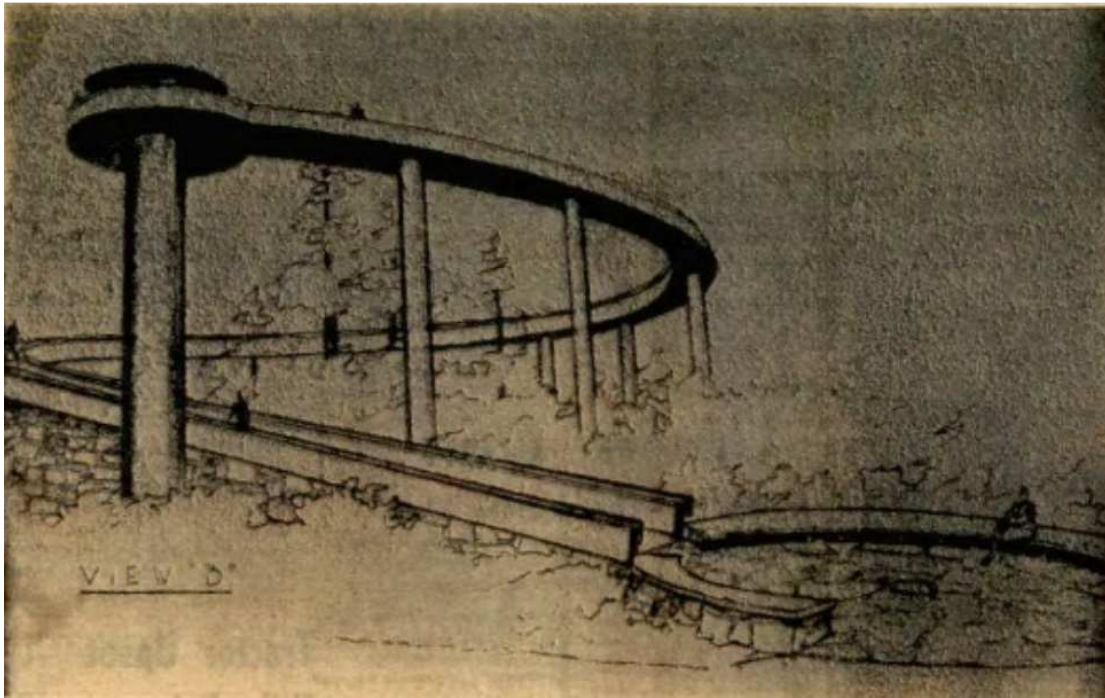


Figure 3.1 Hubert Bebb, 'Roller Coaster?', *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, Knoxville, Tennessee, 1959.⁶⁰

Critiques of modern park architecture grew from the belief that modern architecture did not harmonize with the environment. Conservation groups, primarily the NPA, insisted that rustic buildings, like the Old Faithful Inn at Yellowstone National Park, blended better with the scenery. Environmentalists voiced their negative opinions openly and that publicity threatened the program. Mission 66's success depended on public relations and, while modern architecture was widely accepted across the United States, it

⁶⁰ "Clingmans Tower 'Rocked' by Critics," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, February 12, 1959, 41, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome Tower Correspondence February 1958 Box 2 Folder 64, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

was still strange to see in National Parks. Modernism in places of wilderness and history were shocking for the public.⁶¹ The Tower did not escape that reaction.

National Parks Magazine's 1959 February issue included "A 'Sky-post' for the Smokies," by NPA editor Anthony "Tony" Smith. His article summarized a list of complaints that the NPA had with the design for the Tower. Much like criticism for other Modernist architecture, Smith argued that the design was "flashy and conspicuous and does not blend with the landscape." "Park architecture," he added, "must adhere to standards of true beauty, should hide itself, and should display nature and scenery instead." Smith's interpretation of architecture blending into scenery was based on the Park Service Rustic idea of structures matching scenery. His rejection of Modernism may have stemmed from a concept of wilderness as a historic space. Memory of the American continent as vast and unchanged by European civilizations gives wilderness spaces a nostalgic quality. Structures that evoked pioneer or colonial life would fit better with the idea of wilderness as a part of the American frontier. If this is Smith's perception of National Parks, it is no wonder that he found the Tower's interaction between nature and architecture unacceptable. However, Smith does not fully elaborate on why a rustic design would "hide itself" better than Bebb's model. Perhaps by using timber, the tower might be camouflaged.

He expands upon this point with several more specific criticisms, including that the design was "unnecessarily large" and "extravagantly expensive." These practical criticisms do not consider accessibility and longevity, which were primary concerns that

⁶¹ Allaback, *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of A Building Type*, 13–16.

the design was meant to address. While the NPS had been clear from the start that increased functionality was the primary objective of Mission 66 projects, Smith does not voice an opinion about the Tower on those terms. Ignorance of the primary design objective insinuates that the entire concept of the Tower was objectionable, rather than its appearance. This did not stop Smith from voicing strong criticism of Modernism. He stated that the Tower was “wholly lacking in any feeling for the frontier and the wilderness,” “expresses motion and speed,” “urban in conception,” “mechanical,” “expresses technological power on the loose; it suggests Sputniks; man’s mastery over nature.” These critiques come from an anti-Modernism perspective. They focus on the aesthetic expression of the design. Based on his choice of words, Smith shows that the NPA rejected visible human interference with wilderness.

To conclude, Smith likens the Tower to popular tourist attractions, saying that it was “a Coney Island facility, a Steeplechase Pier feature, and much too strongly suggestive of a roller coaster at a commercial playground.” This reflects the NPA’s general rejection of the parks’ openness to general use. By including a drawing of the Tower with an exaggerated visual perspective, (also reproduced in the Knoxville News-Sentinel with the caption “Roller Coaster?”) [see Fig. 3.1] Smith and other conservationists revealed their fear that the Tower’s design would make Clingmans Dome a resort-like attraction; essentially, they feared commodifying nature. This strikes at the very root of National Park wilderness conflict that started with the Hetch Hetchy controversy. The aesthetic criticism Smith expresses is merely a proxy for the continuing debate over how to use wilderness. However, the design process and implementation of the Tower plan seemed to irk Smith more.

Smith's foremost objection was that plans for the Tower had been announced after they were finalized, thus eliminating any role for the NPA in the Tower's design. His objection to being left out of the design process suggests that the NPA had been influential in such decisions in the past. Smith then moves his critique to the NPS itself, which he believed “should put its efforts into better things than noisy architecture. It should give more attention to the restoration of wilderness areas which have been destroyed by commercialization in the past... and to its interpretive services.”⁶² To Smith, the Tower was a stark illustration of the changes in national parks that the NPA opposed. Because most NPA objections to Mission 66 developments came from the worry that the NPS would inadvertently destroy wilderness areas, the NPS became more vocal about defending their decisions.

NPA criticism of Mission 66 development became so detrimental that naturalist Howard Stagner released a statement on behalf of the Park Service that explained the wilderness values of the Mission 66 era NPS. First, objectively speaking, a wilderness is “an area whose predominant character is the result of the interplay of natural processes, and large enough and so situated as to be unaffected, except in minor ways, by what takes place in the non-wilderness around it.”⁶³ Stagner explains that while this definition illustrates the scientific perspective on wilderness, it does not fully reflect the park ideology. The aspect of “predominant character” was the critical point of that definition. If that character remained intact, the wilderness survived. For that reason, simple construction was acceptable because it did not destroy too much of the character. Stagner

⁶² Smith, “A ‘Sky-Post’ for the Smokies.”

⁶³ Howard R. Stagner, *Preservation of Natural and Wilderness Values in the National Parks* (District of Columbia, United States: National Park Service, 1957), 2.

next offered his second, more subjective conception of wilderness as “quality-defined in terms of personal experience, feelings, or benefits.”⁶⁴ He accordingly lists the NPS qualities for evaluating wilderness areas:

1. A scene or vista of unusual natural interest or beauty unaffected by obvious man-made intrusions.
2. An area secluded or removed from the sight, sounds, and odors of mechanization.
3. A spot where one can feel personally removed from modern civilization.
4. A place where you experience a feeling of adventure such as the pioneer might have felt in conquering the frontiers.
5. A condition where perception, physical skill and ability to be self-reliant in the enjoyment of nature replace mechanical civilized skills.⁶⁵

This list of criteria implies that definitive visual qualities and the experience of rugged individualism were of equal importance. Thus, Stagner expresses the NPS’s view that the National Parks had evolved to consider wilderness as both valuable for sentiment and cultural value, and as an “ecological condition.”⁶⁶ With that in mind, the NPS hoped to ease the NPA’s concerns by showing that the agency considered preserving wilderness for wilderness’s sake as important as providing services to visitors. The qualitative and experiential aspect of the NPS’ interpretation of wilderness directly reflects Mission 66’s efforts to improve visitor accessibility and services. The inclusion of a science as a motive for preservation also ties to Modernism, which relied on new technologies and was driven by functionalism. However beneficial the developments to infrastructure

⁶⁴ Stagner, 3.

⁶⁵ Stagner, 3.

⁶⁶ Stagner, 4.

might have been, these battles in the 50s pushed the NPA and related societies to lobby for the Wilderness Act of 1964. Though Stagner's statement may have voiced shared interests in wilderness, it did not relieve the NPA's concern with Modern architecture, which was rooted in a decades-long struggle to prevent National Park development.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History*, 180.

However beneficial the developments to infrastructure might have been, the negative reaction of some conservationists pushed wilderness preservation into national discussion, which resulted in legislation guaranteeing consideration of wilderness in park planning: the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Chapter 4: The NPA's Wilderness

The NPA was founded three years after the NPS in 1919 as a response to a growing schism between those who wanted the parks to be recreational areas and those, like the NPA, who wanted parks to be protected wilderness spaces, a policy they maintain to this day.⁶⁸ Smith's criticism reflected decades of frustration with NPS policy, starting from the "contradictory mandate" in 1916.

Led by avid wilderness activist Robert Sterling Yard, the 1920s NPA defined itself as an advocate and defender of parks and park ideals. Yard, as both NPA leader and member of the Wilderness Society, strove to protect wilderness from an increasingly consumerist society.⁶⁹ The parks needed advocacy to keep them from becoming dams, like Hetch Hetchy, recreation areas, or mines and ideals needed defending from the ambitions of politicians and entrepreneurs. Yard and other conservationists warned against the danger of "economic boosterism of communities" and recreation enthusiasts in the 1920s. The 1930s saw those threats become reality with the influx of money and cheap labor through the Civilian Conservation Corps.⁷⁰ It was during the 1930s that the

⁶⁸ John C. Miles, *Guardians of the Parks: A History of the National Parks and Conservation Association* (Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis in cooperation with National Parks and Conservation Association, 1995), 188.

⁶⁹ Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement*, Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 243.

⁷⁰ Miles, *Guardians of the Parks: A History of the National Parks and Conservation Association*, 128.

NPA became established as both critic and advocate of the NPS. They aired grievances in their publication, the *National Park Bulletin*, with Yard as the chief editor.⁷¹

In the 1940s, the *National Parks Bulletin* was renamed *National Park Magazine* and changed its focus. It became smaller but more frequently published. With more accessible content that served a broader audience, readers enjoyed informative and entertaining columns. In addition, the magazine included notes and records of legislation that involved the National Parks, and high-quality photographs. With this wider public voice, the NPA reached more people to discuss the wilderness policy in parks.

In the first decades of its existence, the NPA's wilderness policy was constant and based on a recreational definition of wilderness: "a continuous stretch of country preserved in its nature state, open to lawful hunting, fishing, big enough to absorb two-weeks pack trip and kept devoid of roads, artificial trails, cottages, or other works of man."⁷² The organization wanted high standards for national parks and limited development. These standards were based upon the original parks like Yosemite and Yellowstone that had unique, dramatic natural features and little to no visible human impact. Preventing road construction was a key part of wilderness preservation, something that GRSM invited in their Mission 66 plan. Conservationists feared that if wilderness was accessible by car, it would become a commercial commodity. This was in stark contrast to the Organic Act's "enjoyment without impairment policy." For Yard, roads were the greatest danger to park wilderness because, as historian Paul Sutter states,

⁷¹ Miles, 98.

⁷² Sutter, *Driven Wild*, 70.

“roads literally paved the way for all other threats to wilderness...”⁷³ With roads came cars, construction, and overcrowding, which conservationists thought made wilderness too much like cities. The fear of urbanizing wilderness is central to criticisms of Clingmans Dome Observation Tower. Conflict between park development and conservationists increased in the late 1950s after the NPA rewrote their National Park standards.

Independently of the NPS, a 1944 NPA revision referred to new standards as “National Primeval Park Standards.” These standards emphasized primeval parks, with primeval referring to a level of wilderness that showed little to no human influence. National Monuments, of similar character and purpose as the National Primeval Parks, were also considered with the new standards. In 1956 the word “primeval” was dropped in preference for the term “wilderness area,” which more accurately defined features that met their standards. Their evolving definitions eventually began including ecological phrases that clearly identified what they deemed wilderness worthy of preservation: “spacious land and water areas of nation-wide interest established as inviolable sanctuaries for the permanent preservation of scenery, wilderness, and native fauna and flora in their natural condition.” This was later updated to better specify the purpose of what the NPA deemed “Nature Monument Parks,” which they defined as areas containing unequivocal natural settings or features that deserve funding equal to the National Parks. Nature Monument Parks would serve a purpose explicitly for protecting “geological formations, biological features, and other significant examples of nature’s

⁷³ Sutter, xii.

handiwork.”⁷⁴ Though the NPA evolved their understanding of wilderness, their essential goals stayed the same: uphold the unequaled quality of national parks and historic sites, ensure that the primary goal of NPS was preservation, and promote rationally organized and administered Park Service areas. This last motive, promoting rationally organized and administered Park Service areas, is where conflict emerged for architectural design.⁷⁵

In light of conservationists’ worries about wilderness and development, Smith’s statements about design in “A ‘Sky-post’ for the Smokies” in 1959 appear to resonate with growing fears of commercializing wilderness. His article alarmed the members of the NPA, who perhaps by direction of a letter-writing campaign, wrote letters of complaint to congressmen. In these letters they cited their frustration not only with the Tower, but with Grand Canyon National Park’s Shrine of the Ages Chapel and Yosemite National Park’s Tioga Road, which are also in National Park Modern design.⁷⁶ The article quickly roused action from partner conservation groups as well.

One of the first responses to the article was on February 15th, 1959. Concerned about the progress of the Tower’s construction, local executives of the Wilderness Society, a group allied to the NPA, attempted to inspect the Tower. Icy roads closed Clingmans Dome Road, so the Wilderness Society members requested a park ranger take them to the site. This ranger, after the fact, first notified Superintendent of GRSM, Fred

⁷⁴ Miles, *Guardians of the Parks: A History of the National Parks and Conservation Association*, 95.

⁷⁵ Miles, 95.

⁷⁶ “Various Letters from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center,” n.d., GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome History Box 2, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

Overly, that the visit had occurred.⁷⁷ This was the only motion the Wilderness Society made, because they agreed not to interfere with construction after their visit. The NPA took a different approach.

As a response to Mission 66 projects, the NPA set up local action committees to scrutinize the design and construction of structures they disliked.⁷⁸ An NPA Action Group for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was created. It was led by Dr. Daniel Hale, a new member of the NPA and a physicist formerly employed at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. On the 17th of February, the GRSM Action Group met at park headquarters with Superintendent Overly, Landscape Architect Wilhelm, and Park Naturalist Stupka. The exchange that followed showed the bitterness between members of the NPS and NPA, echoing Smith's frustration with the NPA's exclusion from construction consultation was felt by others.

During the meeting Hale announced the group's only plan of action was to watch the project. They discussed the Smith's article and Overly commented that the NPA used to be cooperative but they had become a purely critical group. Hale attempted to defend the article, but Overly said the article was "nefarious and destructive of trust and harmony." Overly stated that he would be suspicious of the group's activity until the NPS and NPA had a better relationship. The group was invited to look at the master plan. Hale wanted four months delay in letting contracts, but Overly said nothing would ever get

⁷⁷ Fred J. Overly, "Visit to Clingmans Dome by Wilderness Society Officials," February 17, 1959, 48, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome History 1 of 2 Box 2 Folder 68, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

⁷⁸ Hubert Bebb, "To Mr. Thomas H. Creighton, Editor Progressive Architecture," February 27, 1959, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome History 1 of 2 Box 2 Folder 68, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

done in the parks if they let groups delay design and construction. He also noted that the public responsibility of administering the National Parks was vested by law in the NPS, not the NPA, until Overly was instructed otherwise he “intended to work along those lines in administering the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.” Overly continued to show his and the NPS’s resolve and commitment to the design:

Dr. Hale inquired if it would be practical to delay construction of the tower. I explained that it would not be. He inquired of the feasibility of collecting down chestnut throughout the park for the construction of a wooden tower, and we patiently explained the impossibility of such a prospect. He suggested a tower with steps. Mr. Wilhelm and Mr. Stupka defended the present design and Mr. Stupka assured them that the small amount of cutting would not be an important factor in opening the forest to windthrow.⁷⁹

While Hale’s questions and suggestions imply that wilderness conservation was at the heart of the action group’s concerns, Overly’s replies show that there was a significant disconnect on what sort of construction was the most damaging to the wilderness. Finally, Hale simply asked Overly for advice on how he could halt tower construction until the design was revised. Overly referred him to *NPM* editor Anthony Smith. Overly concluded that the conference was “peculiar and unsatisfactory,”⁸⁰ a view shared by the action group, whose visit was not the end of NPA’s Tower criticism. This dispute between Hale and Overly began as a clash over the environmental impact of the project, which Overly quickly set to rest by explaining how the impact would be minimal. However, Hale next shifts his objection to the aesthetics of the project, and how the new design conflicts with the NPA’s vision of proper use of wilderness areas. It is in essence a

⁷⁹ Fred J. Overly, “Meeting with the National Parks Association’s Great Smoky Mountains Action Group,” February 18, 1959, 41–43, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome History 1 of 2 Box 2 Folder 68, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

⁸⁰ Overly, 41–43.

shift from a question about environment facts to one about environmental aesthetic value. The new design of the tower would signal that Clingman's Dome is a tourist attraction, thereby radically changing the preservationist character of the that wilderness area. This exposes the true motivation behind the NPA's objection to the Tower, and reflects the basis of the NPA's perspective about how wilderness areas should be used.

We see this shift to the Tower's aesthetic value in an article by Hale and Dr. Bernard Kaiman in a local press on April 25th, 1959, which protests its design. As in “A ‘Sky-post’ for the Smokies,” Hale and Kaiman list various offences of the design, they stating that the Tower is “a violation of the scenic integrity of the mountain wilderness” that is “in conflict with basic park law.”⁸¹ This law, which was the “contradictory mandate,” is later cited.⁸² Hale and Kaiman write that the Tower’s design “violates the spirit and letter of the law by introducing elements sharply alien to the scenery...Modernistic design disfigures the very scenic values the Park Service is enjoined to preserve.”⁸³ Echoing Smith’s notion that visible human impact goes against park values, and that rustic design meshes better with the natural environment, they, like most critics of Bebb’s design, held the opinion that construction of a tower in general was a good idea, but that Modernism was not the best style to use.

Meanwhile the NPS and Wirth argued that the transition to Modernism was consistent with the architectural goal of blending with the scenery. Modern architecture

⁸¹ Dan Hale and Bernard Kaiman, “Modernistic Architecture and National Park Values: With Particular Attention to the Modernistic Tower Planned for Clingmans Dome,” *Knoxville News Sentinel (TN)*, April 1959, 53–61.

⁸² Hale and Kaiman, 53–61.

⁸³ Hale and Kaiman, 53–61.

simply shifted the viewer's focus from building to the physical scenery it was set in. Their plainness made them invisible. Wirth wanted the buildings to be for service instead of visual interest.⁸⁴ At least some writers agreed with this vision. Later issues of the *NPM*, criticized Smith's article. A letter to the editor stated that there "was no landscape for the tower to blend into [Clingmans Dome]," and that "the usual fire towers are singularly homely and, in the spirit of...[Smith's] phillipic, would liken them to oil well derricks or mine hoists, more 'mechanical' than which you can scarcely get!" The author then argues for the practicality of the design, saying that he'd "appreciate not having to elbow my [his] way to a window along the window along the 30-40 foot periphery of the fire tower."⁸⁵ This response represents many of the main points in favor of the tower, and indicates the important factor of first-hand experience with Clingmans Dome.

Although opposition from the NPA was strong, many locals, including business owners, like from Bryson Drug Company, and legislative officials, like House of Representatives member Hugh Alexander supported the design.⁸⁶ Additionally, local conservation groups favored the design. The Great Smoky Mountains Conservation Association unanimously approved it, and its representative expressed that a ramp is "the safest and most sane method of gaining elevation."⁸⁷ The Smoky Mountains Hiking Club committee voiced similar support, as well as their frustration with the NPA's criticism.

⁸⁴ Allaback, *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of A Building Type*, 11.

⁸⁵ W.P. Bebbington, "Letters to the Editor," *National Parks Magazine*, March 1959, 16, Clemson University Archives.

⁸⁶ "Various Letters from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center."

⁸⁷ Carlos C. Campbell, "To Fred J. Overly from the GRSM Conservation Association," February 1959, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome Tower Correspondence February 1958 Box 2 Folder 64, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

The committee member who penned the letter of support, also a member of the NPA and Wilderness Society, said that Smith's article left "many local folks wondering just what the NPA is fighting for," If "ever there was a project on which local conservationists could agree, it was the need for a good observation tower on the Dome..."⁸⁸ Along those lines, the Gatlinburg Chamber of Commerce, who also unanimously endorsed the design, stated that "familiarity with the site tends to enhance its attractiveness from a point of design. Its utilitarianism, the doctrine that the useful is good or the greatest happiness of the greatest number, is satisfactory."⁸⁹ Based on these responses, the Tower's practicality was evident to many groups, but the architectural style was supported as well.

With the support of his colleagues, Roger B. Thompson, a landscape architect from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, wrote to the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* defending the Tower's design by remarking that any manmade structure would be alien to the forest, and that the drawing of it published by the NPA was misleading because it did not include the proper perspective or surrounding scenery [see fig. 3.1]. The expense of the Tower is the lowest any could be, Thompson noted.⁹⁰ Bebb's plan was even backed by organizations such as the Great Smoky Mountains Conservation Association, the Board of Directors of the Blue Ridge Parkway Association, the Tennessee Great Smoky

⁸⁸ Philip Ewald, "To Mr. A. W. Smith from the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club," February 16, 1959, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome Tower Correspondence February 1958 Box 2 Folder 64, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

⁸⁹ "To Fred A. Seaton from The Board of Directors of the Gatlinburg, Tennessee, Chamber of Commerce," February 18, 1959, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome Tower Correspondence February 1958 Box 2 Folder 64, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

⁹⁰ Roger B. Thompson, "To the Editor of The News-Sentinel," February 18, 1959, 66–67, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome Tower Correspondence February 1958 Box 2 Folder 64, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

Mountains National Park Commission, the Western North Carolina Associated Communities, the North Carolina National Park, Parkway and Forest Development Commission, the Gatlinburg, TN Chamber of Commerce, the Mayor of Gatlinburg, the American Automobile Association.⁹¹ The regional dispersion of negative versus positive feedback, the negative from across the country and positive primarily from the local area, implies that it took first-hand experience of GRSM's overcrowded lookout points to understand the need for the Tower. In responses to critical letters, the NPS included sketches that they believed properly illustrated the final result of the project. These images show the intention to obscure the tower with trees, thus limiting the visual intrusion of the Tower [see figs. 3.2-3.3].

Though Bebb's work had backing from important members of the NPS and community, he did not sit by idly while the NPA criticized his design of the Tower.

⁹¹ "National Register of Historic Places, Clingmans Dome Observation Tower, At the Terminus of Clingmans Dome Road, Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GRSM), National Register #12000515," 9–13.



Figure 4.1 R. A. Wilhelm, *How the Clingmans Dome Tower Will Look When It Is Completed*, 1959.⁹²

⁹² R. A. Wilhelm, *How the Clingmans Dome Tower Will Look When It Is Completed*, 1959, Ink on Paper, 1959, 21, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome History 1 of 2 Box 2 Folder 68, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.



Figure 4.2 Bebb and Olson Architects, *Observation Tower Clingmans Dome-Great Smoky Mountains National Park*, 1958-59.

On February 27th, 1959, Bebb sent a “friendly” rebuttal to *NPM*’s Board of Trustees. He complimented the *NPM* on their fight for conservation and stated his love for the parks and experience with the Great Smoky Mountains (his son-in-law was a naturalist for the Park Service at the time.) Bebb showed his amazement with Smith’s article because the descriptions of the Tower were everything he had attempted to avoid. Part of this issue was due to the drawing of the Tower that the *NPM* had used in their article [see fig 3.1.], which was vastly different from what Bebb intended for the final result [see figs. 4.1-4.2]. Bebb suggested that conservationists outline their architectural standards before attacking modern design.

He then summarized the four official criteria for the Tower, the first that the “plan be an uncomplicated, proper, imaginative solution of the problem.” The simple design and creative spiral shape do this. The second criteria, that “materials be enduring,

suitable, relatively low in cost, readily accessible, capable of aesthetic treatment in the handle of skilled workmen,” explains why concrete is the primary medium used for construction, as it was known for its low price and durability. Off-site construction also made concrete a safe choice. The third responsibility of the plan was that the “design in all its parts [is] to be well proportioned, adapted to the locality, and expressive of the function which it performs.” Functionalism was one of the key components of the Tower’s design. Its shape was specifically designed for its location, and planned to provide access to a wide variety of physical abilities. “Lastly, and most importantly, completed structure must be capable of eliciting a favorable response for the viewers and users over a long period of time. This last quality can only be injected by a designer with experience or exceptional training, or both.” Creating something visually appealing was perhaps the most difficult part of the assignment. While Bebb’s plan received mixed reviews, the criticisms often focused on its location in a wilderness area rather than the design itself.⁹³ Referring to the design as “urban” or like a “rollercoaster” does not necessarily indicate the design was disliked in and of itself. The descriptions merely imply that the Tower is out of place, that it belongs in a city setting.

After construction, Wirth assessed the design for the Tower as “inappropriate.”⁹⁴ His opinion may have been swayed by the backlash to the design, as he had been one of the key figures to approve it. The conditions for the Tower’s design match the direction the NPS was looking for in Park Service Modern: innovation and accessibility. Again, Bebb acknowledges the NPA’s opinions as valid, stating that his design expressed the

⁹³ Bebb, “To Board of Trustees National Parks Magazine,” February 27, 1959, 23–26.

⁹⁴ Carr, *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma*, 300.

opposite of what they accused it. However, he states that the Tower is not “flashy and conspicuous,” rather, it visually falls into the background. Bebb explains the artistic theory behind using plain, flat surfaces to direct viewer attention to the scenery instead of merely mimicking the landscape with stone and timber and asks questions to challenge the architectural theory in “A ‘Sky-post’ for the Smokies:”

Why does a rough hewn log cabin appear right and a concrete structure appear wrong to a conservationist? Should we build like Daniel Boone built, or build like Daniel would build if he were alive today?

By suggesting that Park Service Rustic is no more appropriate to the wilderness than Park Service Modern, Bebb implies that park design is reflective of times they are constructed in and not any sort of authentic park tradition. Mentioning Daniel Boone, a famed American frontiersman, highlights Bebb’s view that the association of rustic construction with America’s frontier history is based on a nostalgic perspective,

Why does a conservationist prefer to build a cheap tower totally lacking in beauty rather than a carefully designed structure of concrete? Is the idea of conservation furthered by the erection of temporary wood shelters rather than well sited well planned modern structures? Do we pay homage to god by building a temple of slabs?

Bebb asks why conservationists feel the need to openly criticize the aesthetic of the Tower, and he asserts that cheaper, temporary structures are not better for the environment than concrete, and that the experiential nature of Clingmans Dome is not served well by presenting it on anything less than a crafted structure made for that specific location. Again, Bebb emphasizes that the value behind Park Service Rustic is primarily nostalgia, not conservation. He argues that if the spirit of the frontiersman is captured in the aesthetic of Park Service Rustic, then it is also present in Park Service Modern. Bebb concludes by stating that pioneers used readily available materials to

create structures that directly addressed their needs, and that the Tower follows that same tradition through its materials and design.⁹⁵ His rebuttal further shows that criticism of the Tower, and as an extension, Park Service Modern, is not related to a tangible flaw of Modern design. The negativity originates from a conflict of how National Parks should regulate development.

⁹⁵ Bebb, "To Board of Trustees National Parks Magazine," February 27, 1959, 23–26.

Chapter 5: The Tower Completed



Figure 5.1 *Rain Greets Opening Of Park Tower, 1959.*⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Jack Blanton, "Rain Greets Opening Of Park Tower," *The Knoxville Journal*, October 24, 1959, 31, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome Tower Correspondence September-October 1959 Box 2 Folder 67, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.



RAINY RIBBON SNIPPING—Hubert Bebb, right foreground, cuts the ribbon at a brief ceremony opening the new Clingmans Dome Tower. Also in the foreground are Fred Wingeier, left, district ranger of the Headquarters District, and Dr. Kelly E. Bennett, Bryson City, former chairman of the North Carolina Park, Parkway and Forest Development Commission. Among those visible in the background are James E. Thompson, president of Great Smoky Mountains Conservation Association; Carlos Campbell, secretary of the Association; Dr. James T. Tanner, David D. Dickey, Guy Frizzell, John T. O'Connor, all of Knoxville, and Raymond Olson, associated with Mr. Bebb in the Gatlinburg architectural firm of Bebb and Olson, which designed the tower. Rain fell throughout the ceremony.

Figure 5.2 *Clingmans Dome Tower Opened, 1959.*⁹⁷

Though construction had started in November of 1958, it was delayed six months due to poor weather conditions. Work resumed April 6, 1959. However, because of continued weather setbacks, the Tower was not opened until October 23, 1959.⁹⁸ After almost a full year of debate over design, a white, spiral, concrete ramp with a “flying saucer” looking platform at the top opened to the public.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Carson Brewer, “Clingmans Dome Tower Opened: Chill Drizzle Mars Ceremonies,” *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, October 24, 1959, 30, GGRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome Tower Correspondence September-October 1959 Box 2 Folder 67, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

⁹⁸ A. Hartigan, “Notes on Clingmans Dome Tower,” 1998, 9, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome History 1 of 2 Box 2 Folder 68, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

⁹⁹ “Clingmans Dome Tower Opens To Public Friday,” *Maryville-Alcoa Daily Times*, October 21, 1959, GRSM 108632 II.A.1.H Clingmans Dome Tower Correspondence September-October 1959 Box 2 Folder 67, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Collections Preservation Center.

Rain, which had delayed the opening by months, graced the ceremony as Hubert Bebb cut the ribbon [see figs. 4.1-4.2].¹⁰⁰ Both supportive organizations and NPA members were invited to attend. What could have been a simple renovation of a park feature was instead a place of conflict over aesthetic, wilderness, and national park values. The Tower's design had come at a time of increased attention to the park, and a reinvigoration of worry about park infrastructure, which had been a concern since the early days of National Parks.

Bebb's design, and response to criticism, shows the NPS's move towards Modernism as an attempt to reinvent the National Park System to accommodate overcrowding and to fit a society dominated by automobiles. The functionalist structures from Mission 66 show that frontier nostalgia was modified to fit an age of technology. Logs and stonework that harkened back to colonial America were replaced with contemporary concrete and steel that fulfilled a notion to create structures that would last for many years into the future. Park Service Rustic shifted away from its buildings that mimicked the landscape to Park Service Modern buildings that were invisible compared to it. Innovation and change were, by policy, more reluctantly accepted by the NPA. Their concept of nature without human involvement did not agree with the visual representation of manmade materials that Park Service Modern presented. While the transition in architectural styles reflected societal changes, conservationists rejected it because of a conflict over the use of wilderness that grew out of the Hetch Hetchy controversy in 1908, and the "contradictory" mandate in 1916. The question of how National Parks should be used created a rift between the NPS and NPA, the former

¹⁰⁰ Blanton, "Rain Greets Opening Of Park Tower," 31.

wanting to keep the parks open and accessible to as much of the American populous as possible, and the latter wanting to limit human interference in wilderness in order to preserve scenic qualities. Clingmans Dome Observation Tower's design, construction, and public reaction shows the overlap between the disconnect between the NPS and NPA and the use of architectural discourse to continue the debate over park wilderness.

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