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Nature, Inc.



Photo by Hugh Hardy.

Nature in Yosemite seems almost to have achieved intentionality or “self-consciousness.” The walls of the Valley are vertical, the floor is flat, the entry is dramatically indicated. Yosemite is not just a place of exquisite beauty; it is a natural place that by virtue of its highly bounded form makes an insulting reference to the built environment.

There are lesser yosemites everywhere in capitalist culture, from the “canyons” of Manhattan to the gift box that has had its top torn off in eager anticipation. Coventry Cathedral, accidentally improved by the Nazi attempt to destroy it, is now open to the sky and aspires to insert itself into nature and become a yosemite. But none of these express themselves with the power and intensity of the original.

Social lines are arbitrary and the design practice that follows them promotes status and other shallow distinctions. By contrast, in Yosemite the oppositions in nature, such as the line that separates the rock from the sky, do not serve to separate one human being from another. The edge of Mirror Lake, where the water touches wildwoods and boulders, traces itself directly on the soul as a sensual contrast of rough and smooth, of male and female principles, of every gentle touch of opposites that unite humankind and make life sweet. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has remarked that a mountain reflected in a lake is the perfect image of a consciousness without ego.

My childhood impression of Yosemite was affected by a great deal of camping in parks “designed” by my paternal grandfather, Earle Edgerly MacCannell, who was Washington State Parks



Courtesy National Park Service.

architect during the Depression. He made the Indian Museum at Vantage, at the confluence of the Snake and Columbia rivers, and several other large projects, but mainly his parks consisted of a dirt road, a unisex latrine, a central well with a hand pump, a sign and sometimes fireplaces. I do not recall ever having seen a ranger in a Washington State park in the 1950s.

My family enjoyed our week in Yosemite, the farthest away from home I had ever been, but we maintained suspicious distance from the Yosemite Park and Curry Company (YP&CC) facilities. A park with a gift shop, cafeteria and laundry suggested some kind of corruption. The "Presidential" Ahwahnee Lodge, arrogantly named for the Indians whose humble lodges it displaced, was something simply to be feared like the evil cartoon castles of Dr. Frankenstein or Snow White's stepmother.

I attended the nature-interpretation campfire at which the ranger explained the tradition of the Firefall. Everyone maintained silence, as requested, waiting to hear the shout from the Valley floor, "Let the fire fall!" and we witnessed the burning embers (an "entire tree," the ranger said) shoveled off Glacier Point, cascading into the Valley. It was amusing, but I couldn't figure out what it had to do with anything "natural."

Great parks, even great urban parks such as Golden Gate in San Francisco or Central in New York, and especially national parks, are symptomatic of the guilt that accompanies the human impulse to destroy nature. We destroy on an unprecedented scale, then in response create parks that replay the nature-society opposition on a stage entirely framed by society.

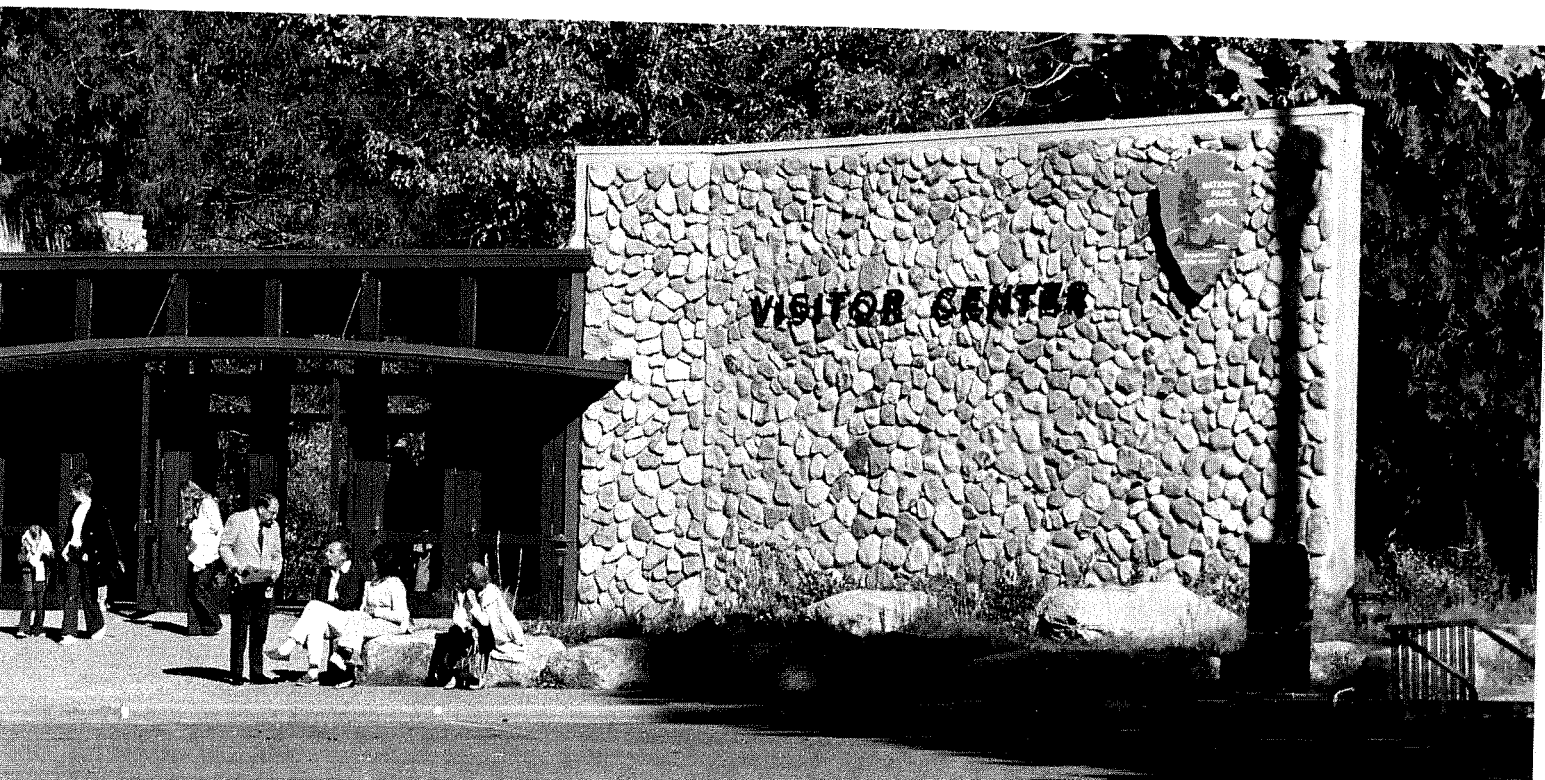
The great parks are not nature in any original sense. They are marked-off, interpreted, museumized nature—reminders of what nature would be like if nature still existed.

As a celebration of nature, these parks are the "good deed" of industrial civilization. They also quietly affirm the power of industrial civilization to stage, situate, limit and control nature. By restricting "authentic" or "historic" nature to parks, we assert our right to destroy everything not protected by the Park Act.

This contradiction is buried in human consciousness under the ideology of recreational nature, the notion that we are supposed to forget the sense of limits society imposes on us, and on nature, as we enter these parks. We are admitted on the moral conditions that we enter only with our essential humanity and that we leave our social needs, desires and statuses behind. We are forbidden to demand that parks satisfy these desires. After all, parks were established out of guilt that we already went far enough in forcing nature to satisfy social needs, perhaps too far.

None of this applies to Yosemite Valley. We want to project upon Yosemite a certain narcissism. It did not bother to wait for an act of Congress or Presidential decree to be a special place. It seems to have marked itself off from its surroundings. It is so beautiful that it just might be immune to the ravages of civilization. It challenges the worst in us, the part which wants to compete with nature and eventually to win.

If great cities have parks, then this greatest of parks must have a city. The YP&CC concessions have been purchased by MCA Incorporated, an entertainment conglomerate. Yosemite City is



a capitalist ideal, a "company town." El Capitan looks down upon 2.6 million paying customers annually, their arrivals now scheduled by Ticketron. There are hydro-electric power and sewage disposal plants, a Federal court, jail, hospital, clinic and dentist offices, a morgue, kennel, stables, ice rink, shopping mall, golf course, tennis courts, swimming pools, snack bars, art galleries, photo studios, cafeteria and restaurants, beauty parlor, barber shop, United States Post Office, commercial bank, supermarket, churches, paved parking for more than 2,000 cars, shuttle buses, several bars (some with big-screen television), a mountaineering school, cross-country and down-hill skiing facilities, an Indian Cultural Center and, of course, the National Park Service.

Social values are raised to "ideals" in Yosemite City. The entire range of social statuses has been reconstructed in the accommodations, from the "homeless" sleeping on the ground (\$4/night) to presidents and kings sleeping at the Ahwahnee (\$187/night) with its rule of "jacket and tie" in the dining hall.

Yosemite City is even developing a moral sense: rock climbing on El Capitan and hang-gliding are acceptable, but parachute jumping off Glacier Point and snowmobiles are specifically prohibited. There had been a horse race track but it was decommissioned.

Conventions and other group meetings are permitted during the off-peak season only. The Firefall is gone because it created traffic jams.

Yosemite City is not just any city but one that promotes specific values: monopoly capitalism, material comforts, status distinctions, and especially the right to be entertained.



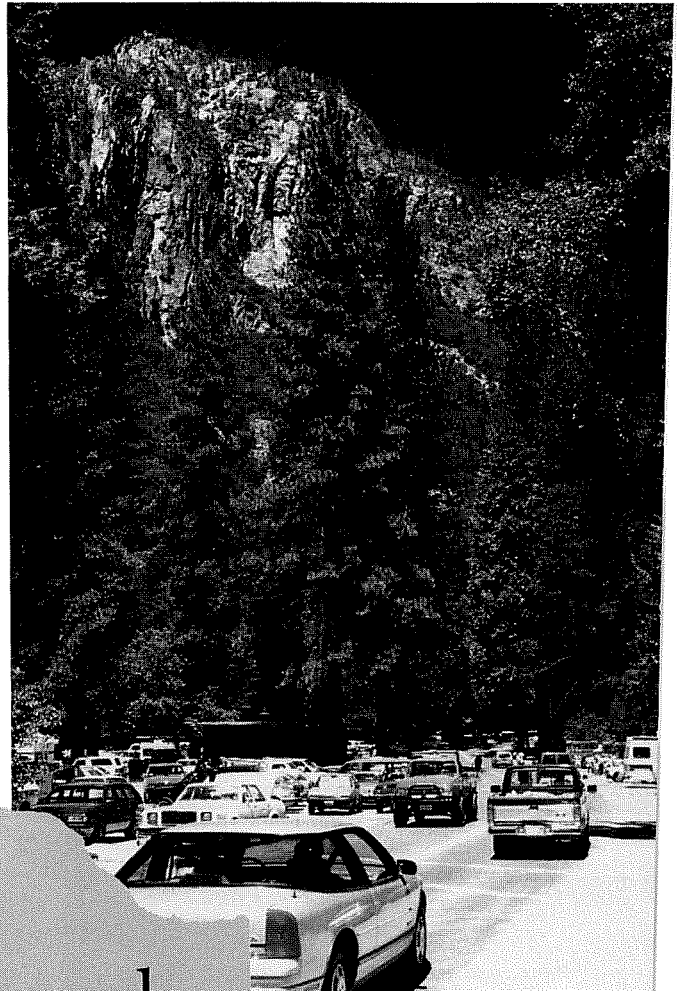
Courtesy National Park Service.

YP&CC and MCA are successfully transforming Yosemite into a "Nature Theme Park."

It is tempting to look upon Yosemite as the final battle ground of "nature" versus "society": two of the worthiest adversaries head-to-head; the most beautiful natural place on earth against an entire postmodern city owned by a major corporation, attempting to take the place from within.

But this is a pseudo-battle. Its outcome is rigged. It is not nature versus society, but "framed" nature versus corporate society. Society has already won. The "battle" is only another entertainment. Unless, of course, we decide to change society.

Excerpted from Dean MacCannell, The Tourist Papers, to be published next year by Routledge publishers in London.



Yosemite Valley.

Photo by Todd W. Bressi.

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