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Towards an Architecture of the Valley

Architecture in wilderness is a contradiction in terms. The moment construction commences, unspoiled nature vanishes. The process of building replaces air with artifact.

While the built environment is subject to the decay of natural forces, in nature it remains an intervention. It may provide a vantage point, but it modifies experience. And because architecture is so rooted in cultural memory, its structures not only change physical fact, they are redolent of other times and places. Architecture in Yosemite therefore plays an uneasy role, part of an awkward balance between primal experience and public access.

Nature's realm is a constantly evolving phenomenon in which only change is constant. For the Valley to appear the same each season it must continually regenerate itself. When contemplating Yosemite the constancy of the natural world is revealed as an illusion sustained by our relatively brief lifespan.

In a setting such as Yosemite, the "permanence" of architecture becomes as ephemeral as a camper's tent, and architecture's response to evolving cultural values is revealed. Even though Yosemite's buildings appear constant, the quickly changing habits of our society cause them to register differently.

Evaluating the success of an architectural project depends upon clear knowledge of its intent. Since Yosemite is meant to be a public park, not a wilderness preserve, a great variety of accommodations and facilities is called for. Some appeal to the romantic aspects of nature, others to the rational or scientific. No single architectural response could be correct for all visitors; a rustic cabin may be ideal for informal socializing, but it is a poor substitute for the Ahwahnee dining room's pageantry and grandeur.

Yosemite's eclectic group of hotel structures offers a splendid range of choice about shelter and documents a wide range of enclosure. It represents a panoply of architectural ideas from the grand halls and mock rustic grandeur of the Ahwahnee Hotel to the more familiar motel-like precincts of the Lodge or the disposition of a compound of tents. It offers as many ways to interact with the Valley's spectacular natural setting as the National Park Service and Yosemite Park and Curry Company can devise.

For instance, the stone-laden expanses of the Ahwahnee attempt to become part of the landscape by using its very rocks and trees to form an indigenous profiled pile. Inside, the great dining room windows frame views of the landscape in order to present towering sylvan vistas in scale with the enormity of nature beyond.

But for the most part the Ahwahnee's public spaces turn inwards, cut off from the outside by sloping eaves and small windows. The hotel is a series of well appointed caves, not a Falling Water where nature is theatrically thrust into indoor experience.

The Lodge stems from a different tradition, one that approaches architecture as a more rational act. Here columns and beams are only for support. Unlike Ahwahnee's, they bear no patternings from the imagined rituals of Indians.

In these simple structures of steel, wood and glass each element is independent of the other. Together they form a diagram of enclosure that may seek an integration of outdoors and indoors, but the modest scale of these buildings robs interior experience of the grandeur of this place, giving their rooms the familiarity of a motel by the highway.

The present hotels of Yosemite are each the result of their author's sense of a common social setting, not an attempt to integrate the need for lodging with the spectacular nature of this Valley. Dinner at the Ahwahnee is in jacket and tie, an extension of domestic rituals that were natural to its creators. Their dining room offers great forest vistas to diners whose clothing precludes any active participation with wilderness. By contrast, the Lodge's cafeteria suits family life with a knockabout informality common to suburbia. Diners are ready to stride into the forest, even though it remains invisible behind the steam tables and coffee urns. Thus the great game of architecture lies in a resolution of our inherently different responses to outside and inside.

A more basic difference between the two hotels lies in their acceptance of the automobile. Guests at the Ahwahnee pass between stone gates, advance down a woodland road and arrive beneath a massive *porte cochere* made of giant logs and boulders. Journey's end is all drama. A long, wooden walkway, open only on one side to the forest, heightens anticipation before guests come indoors to the main, two-story lobby. Here tall windows, stencilled columns and beams, together with framed textiles, announce this as a place associated with Native Americans, something out of the ordinary.

By contrast, the Lodge accepts automobiles without restriction. Reception is in one building, lodging elsewhere, both reached by car. The convenience of driving to one's room is offset by the banality of being in a motel parking lot. The buildings are two-story extrusions of the classic motel plan and therefore comparatively innocuous. As a result the paraphernalia of the highway dominates the architecture.



**The Ahwahnee Hotel
dining room.**

**Courtesy Yosemite Park
and Curry Co.**

A small compound of buildings behind the Lodge's reception structure suggests what a plan organized by pedestrian movement might be like. Here is a pattern of covered, wooden walkways without cars and an informal amphitheatre of benches that suggest nature can be part of architecture. But the focus of this courtyard is diffused and lacks conviction.

The automobile was banned in Yosemite until 1913. James Bryce, a British ambassador and social critic who addressed the American Civic Association in 1912 to plead that cars had no place in the Park, argued: "The whole feeling of spontaneity and freshness of primitive nature would be marred by the modern invention, with its din and whir and odious smell.... If you want to enjoy the beauties of such landscapes as Yosemite presents, you must see them slowly."

But America's preoccupation with wheeled access has dominated the once wild Valley with redundancy of roads, turnouts, turnabouts, parking lots, bus stops and drop-offs: all paved, all alien. Cars, buses, recreational vehicles, vans, motorcycles, panel and pick-up trucks of every conceivable sort are everywhere.

Although the convenience of this paved road network is undeniable, its compacted extent raises questions about the Valley's ability to regenerate itself. Existing vegetation appears healthy enough, but will its replacement find room to grow among the



The Ahwahnee Hotel.
Photo by Hugh Hardy.

detritus of automobiles and campsites? Will we give a valley of natural wonders to succeeding generations or just a series of parking lots?

A direct encounter with nature is the justification for all the roads, utilities, trails, signposts and buildings, but what is happening to nature under this onslaught? What remains wild? How can wilderness coexist with the paraphernalia of contemporary society? What is the experience that Yosemite now offers contemporary preservation of an internationally acclaimed place?

The vastness and power of this Western landscape is tied to the very identity of America. We find an excitement and munificence in the contemplation of this vastness. It forms a psychic part of what America is. The Valley should not suffer the trivialization and indifference with which we treat so many of our other natural wonders.

It is time to ready Yosemite for a new century and a new generation of tourists. We should begin now to reestablish the idea of an unspoiled natural beauty, which first brought the public here. Assuming that rededication to this ideal could temper the rapaciousness with which America has attacked so many other landscapes, a new architecture in the Valley could offer a spirit of adventure and discovery, not complacent familiarity.

Since the Valley is a finite place and our population is increasing, there is pressure to increase access and accommodations. But in fact, the opposite logic should rule. In order to preserve what Frederick Law Olmsted called a "museum of natural science," access to so special a place should be restricted as the population increases. The preciousness of Yosemite becomes all the greater as the rest of the country is overrun.

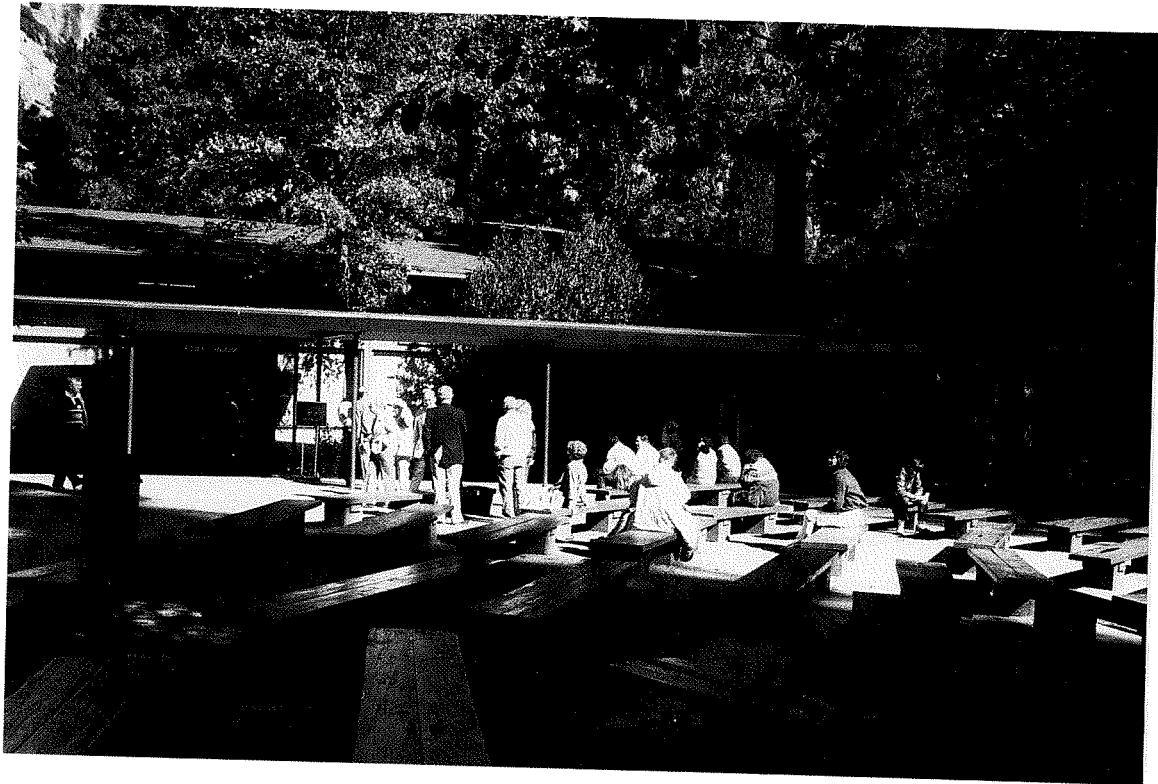
If Olmsted was right and Yosemite should be treated like a museum, then the artifacts of contemporary civilization should be kept to a minimum on the Valley floor. Although contemporary museums have discovered the value of commerce and handily dispense reproductions, books, posters and T-shirts with entrepreneurial skill, few mix these artifacts with their collections.

Why cannot Yosemite do the same? Yosemite Village offers amenities that could be better located outside the Park. The idea of convenience shopping and T-shirts would be more appropriate to the Park entrances than the Valley. Even the Visitor Center with its informative displays could more logically provide an introduction to the Park rather than encumber its very heart.

Suppose, however fanciful it may seem, automobile access were restricted. Biking paths to the scenic wonders of the Valley would make them all the more magical, being somewhat difficult to get to. Overnight lodging would still be possible in the Valley, but it would be restricted in number to those with time to arrive and depart by secondary transportation, not the family car.

**Amphitheater at the
Yosemite Lodge.**

Photo by Hugh Hardy.



Think how Yosemite might then develop an architecture special and exhilarating enough to stamp it as worthy of the added effort required to reach the Valley. If each journey were more of an exploration, the architecture could be more varied and imaginative—the product of an effort to site and design buildings that specifically respond to nature rather than to convention or convenience.

For instance, it is startling that in a place where the drama of the surrounding landscape calls out for looking up, almost all of Yosemite's hotel interiors prevent this. Instead of an architecture that celebrates the drama of this giant granite sluice, the hotel rooms offer the reassuring familiarity and convenience of roadside America.

The great Valley itself is the most architectural of natural places, with a distinct floor, unmistakable walls and a heavenly ceiling. Imagine an architecture whose forms and materials would complement this forested reach. Its buildings could be sufficiently varied to enhance ritual or convenience, or the experiences of casual observers or committed students of nature. The siting and organization of its roads and the services offered would not be controlled by the logic of the marketplace but by the quality of experience visitors receive.

It would take a great leap of faith to propel such a program through the complex public/private ownership that now controls the Valley. Despite the many vested interests, the time for a

change may well have come. We are poised before a new millennium. We have a new awareness of environmental issues. It is now possible to think of our stewardship of Yosemite in larger terms, to look at its current exploitation and to contemplate with renewed understanding what a special resource this is.

Guided by such a spirit it is possible to imagine a redevelopment of the Valley that would decrease the density of human habitation and build an architecture whose intervention in the wilderness would be more part of the Valley, not an imposition on it. This could be an architecture responsive to the variety and changes of nature: Its vantage points would enhance discovery, its structures would be in sympathy with the site, and its materials would complement those of the Valley itself. Such an achievement would become a worthy addition, a fitting response to the wonder of this place.