

VISITOR CENTERS AND THEIR USE

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Now that we have jostled with interpretive planning, let's tangle with the term "visitor center." This concept, which in our business is synonymous with "interpretive center," was brought to widespread attention during our early MISSION 66 program. The idea was that the term would be suitable for all public use buildings, large or small, in which visitors to the National Park Service areas would tend to gravitate or "center." Unfortunately, to many management people the word became envisioned as a large, sprawling \$300,000 building, with the emphasis on administrative offices, conference rooms and storage for correspondence files.

What, then, is a Visitor Center? Although we have many large physical plants falling under this title, in actual practice a great many of our parks have structures serving as visitor centers, despite the fact that they may have been officially designated as "ranger contact-stations" or "orientation shelters."

In most of our earlier visitor centers--those constructed between 1956 and 1962--the idea of these facilities serving the role formerly played by park museums was uppermost in planning. Most have exhibit rooms, study collections, laboratories and work room space for both area staff and traveling scholars who pay us visits.

Where should a visitor center be placed? Other things being equal, the visitor center should exploit whatever scenic, scientific, or

historically important view of resource the park area affords, such as this visitor center at Effigy Mounds which is placed near a group of mounds. However, if a sensitive site might be ruined by the construction of a visitor center because of historic or scientific ruins of a fragile nature, or if the structure would intrude on a magnificent scene, it is often necessary to move it away from the focal point for protective purposes. So, your site must be chosen with care and sensitivity.

Another important factor to consider is that the site have maximum public exposure, or as Woolworth once stated, a public building must be on a "hot corner" to be successful. At Mount Rushmore this hot corner was easy to select as all roads converged there, and the resource was close to a small prominent point. At Dinosaur, the visitor center was constructed over the bone deposits, and the relieving of the fossil bones became the great interpretive "hot corner."

Other elements should be carefully considered. Restroom facilities should be ample, and our experience suggests that they be closely associated with the building, but with entry and egress outside the visitor center to reduce crowding in the lobby. This serving biological needs near your interpretive center also helps "pull" sizeable proportions of the public to your facility, making the capital outlay pay off to greater percentages of park visitors.

Lobbies are extremely important in a visitor center function. It is here that the visitor has time to decompress from his drive with momma and the kids yelling at him. This period of calm often makes the visitor more receptive to your story and more willing to take the extra time to participate in the scheduled activities.

It is necessary that visitors to the lobby be made welcome as soon as possible. This is best accomplished by the strategically located information counter manned by friendly, helpful personnel. An information counter should, of course, have a good stock of free brochures, maps and other materials in demand by the public. In most cases, it is also desirable to have a selection of pertinent (not junk) interpretive publications available for over-the-counter sale.

As soon as the visitor is ready for the park experience he may wish to visit the exhibit area. Design of exhibit rooms, if centered about specimens of real worth, uniqueness and pertinence to the area, seem to be the most effective. Next in line are the touch-type exhibit and the quiz. Refurnished structures, while generally not in the visitor center are high in visitor interest, and if well done, do much to "make the story." Often tours of these buildings begin from the visitor center as do nature walks or boat trips.

Due to rising costs of personnel and difficulty in recruiting highly skilled public speakers, we quickly directed our attention to automatic audiovisual presentations. Some are simple devices using captioned slides as illustrated by this three-minute slide program for Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.

The captioned slide program is effective for simple orientation, but for a more sophisticated program with voice narration and background music, it is necessary to go to more complex equipment and usually an auditorium environment. In such installations, audiovisual presentations are given in auditoriums closely adjacent to the lobby. This permits ready access, but has built-in headaches. Only on rare occasions is it possible to avoid acoustical interference. Lobby sounds inevitably

filter into the "theater" and only rarely have our own installations, at least, been designed so that the recorded commentary does not leak into the lobby with a distracting effect.

However, with all their defects, the motion picture or automatic slide program with voice narration and music background, seems to get the message across far better than the standard exhibit sequences. Accordingly, a far greater emphasis is now being given to audiovisual programs. Quite recently we have started to produce specially designed 16 mm. color films and suggesting designs for more compatible equipment. It is likely that our efforts in interpreting the general park story will rely far more heavily on audiovisual in future than on actual specimen displays and other museum exhibition techniques.

These audiovisual presentations, in our experience, seldom should last longer than 12 to 15 minutes. Ideally, they do much more than acquaint the visitor with logistics of his trip - what to see-and-do. They also have an inherent capacity to arouse a sort of emotional involvement with the area's features. When this mood is achieved, the visitor is motivated to make the most rewarding experience out of the trip, and to help the park staff protect it. He no longer is a litterbug or an initial carver.

As I indicated earlier, in our own operations we usually make a dual use of our visitor centers. Not only are they centers for the visitor as the name implies; they also frequently double as park administrative headquarters with the same array of offices, file cabinets, photocopying machines and drafting tables that you find in the usual administrative building of any operation--public or private. In some situations, this has not worked out too well, either to the visitors' benefit or to

efficient operations of the park staff. If the park is fairly large and well staffed, there will be many offices and much going and coming therefrom. In such cases, a clear separation must be made between these two opposing uses. Successful architectural adjustments include provisions for separate staff parking, employee-only entrances, staff-only toilets, etc.

Access to the "working offices" is usually made from the rear of the building, away from the visitor parking area and the structure's main entrance. A means of ready access, however, for those occasional travelers who also have official business should be made so that they need not be detoured 2 or 3 blocks in order to see the lost and found pivot man or the complaint department.

One of the most important points to consider in initial planning for visitor centers has to do with its anticipated use by the public. This is tremendously important and yet it is one of the hardest decisions to make because accurate data are almost always lacking. Some fortunate installations have been able to conduct accurate visitor surveys and are so situated that anticipated increase or decrease in attendance can be safely forecast. In most cases, the best assumption you can make as to visitor trends is to expect them to rise, and at about the same rate noted elsewhere in the park vicinity. You simply can't expect to take care of those occasional--or even frequent--peak days; it is our responsibility, however, to plan and build for the maximum average attendance we can forecast.

A successful visitor center will provide a sense of "openness" in a lobby and, to a somewhat lesser degree, in the exhibit room. We use a rule of thumb figure of 12 sq. ft. per person in the lobby and 20 sq.

ft. in exhibit rooms and lounge areas. Cost usually forces us to squeeze them much tighter, of course. Seating capacity needed for an audiovisual auditorium will vary with the length of the program being planned, the frequency of its presentation and the degree to which people will be enticed into it, but it is generally figured at 6 sq. ft. per visitor. Here you have some degree of control. On busy days, show frequency can be greatly increased, thereby handling more people per hour; on peak days you can hang an "out of order" sign on the door! On days with light travel, announcements about a "free show" on a PA system can attract nearly 100% attendance. Most of our people feel it better to have a heavily used and normally crowded auditorium than one in which empty seats are noticeable during much of the time.

Once you have decided what your traffic is likely to be--both its total volume and periodicity--you should decide how best to channel it in the building. You will want to decide on a general circulation or flow pattern. We have no real "SOP" in this field. Some of our more successful visitor centers afford a wide opening between the lobby and exhibit rooms. This permits an easy circular flow from the initial contact (in the lobby), through the interpretive displays. The audiovisual show then follows and is usually announced immediately the previous audience has left.

It is easy to see that a flow pattern resembling a vortex quickly develops. Since both compartments work out of the lobby, it becomes both an initial gathering point and an exit center. If sufficient space is available in the lobby for these conflicting circulation patterns, little confusion seems to exist. After all, we are not dealing with excitable groups awaiting the departure of the Queen Elizabeth or try-

ing to get into a football game. Park visitors are generally family groups who tend to stay together and who seem to "flow" through our displays, quite happily, from a sort of Brownian motion. Dependent somewhat upon the field situation, ideal circulation would have the visitor pursue the following path:

1. "Decompression" and reorientation as he flops into a comfortable chair or couch in the lobby, after having first visited the restroom and drinking fountain (outside).
2. The "warm welcome" experience extended by an outgoing and personable information attendant.
3. Orientation to his new role as a park visitor through an imaginative audiovisual presentation.
4. Based on the above, with his natural curiosity rekindled, a leisurely tour of the exhibits on display.
5. Detailed instructions on how to get to those features he now wishes to see, from the friendly information attendant.
6. Now armed with a free tour map, and possibly some interpretive literature, he goes out to the field and begins his real park experience.

What is the chief purpose of a visitor center? We generally believe that it should "catch" the visitor shortly after he reaches the area; it should satisfy his basic needs, both anatomical and intellectual. It should serve only as a springboard for his venture into the real park story--the landscape, historical remains or recreational area which the park or monument preserves. Having had this preliminary "briefing," he (ideally) is made aware of the nature of the experience which he seeks, the best way in which to do it, and a sense of responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the environment.

Such a fine role can seldom be played, but all of us who work closely with the interpretive programs in parks know that a most encouraging proportion of the mass public does get varying degrees of this treatment.