



## Disability

### Too Little, Too Late

Rafael Viñoly's Tokyo International Forum (above), a performing arts center, is known among Tokyo youth as a premiere cruising spot. And for eager teens in wheelchairs, the futuristic building's spiraling ramp with skyline views might seem an oasis. But, sadly, it's a mirage—the Forum's ramp is too steep for wheelchairs.

With the elderly population growing, the government is beginning to address Japan's lack of disability-access laws, but disability advocates have long believed a crisis is at hand. In August 1991, a young girl spent 14 hours trapped in a train station elevator reserved for the handicapped; her disability prevented her from reaching the buttons. And in April of this year, a man in a wheelchair was killed by a train when he became trapped on a crosswalk and was unable to push an emergency button placed out of his reach.

The designers of Japan's postwar reconstruction put

greatest priority on the efficient movement of corporate workers, with little consideration for the country's disabled population. Disabled Japanese have long been relegated to separate schools. The result, advocates say, is that this population, which grew from 4.9 percent in 1950 to nearly 19.2 percent in 2000, remains largely invisible.

Few accessibility laws exist in Japan that affect private buildings. In November 2000, the "Barrier-Free Transportation Law" took effect, requiring public transit systems to be more accessible, and by 2010 the government hopes to make all transportation hubs with more than 5,000 daily users accessible. But Michiko Kikuchi, appointed to form disability policy for Tokyo's metropolitan government, believes a barrier-free Japan is a long way off. "It is impossible to close all the vertical gaps in town," she lamented to the *Japan Times* last year. What the handicapped need, she said, "is a helping hand." *Jacob Ward*

# Mission of Mercy

More than 100 Park Service visitor centers, designed by some of the country's best midcentury architects, are in danger of being torn down. **Fred Bernstein** asks: Should they be saved?

**Preservation** At the Salt Pond Visitor Center—a jaunty modernist building at the Cape Cod National Seashore—metal window frames are pitted; ceilings show signs of steady leaks. And while the bathrooms are far too small for the summer throngs, a spacious theater, designed in an era when a ranger might draw large crowds to a nature talk, stands empty. To Seashore officials, the building is obsolete. But to preservationists, it's an important example of midcentury modernism, one of more than 100 such buildings commissioned by the National Park Service in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

"Quite a few of the buildings are in danger," says Randy Biallis, chief historical architect with the National Park Service (NPS) in Washington. "They're 40 to 50 years old, and were built to serve a much smaller visitor population." Biallis believes the recent increase in the popularity of national parks has overtaxed the capacity of the centers. "There are a lot of proposals to remove these buildings, or to do major rehabs," he says. One such rehab, at Bryce Canyon in Utah, will turn a 1958 visitor center by Cannon & Mullen into an ersatz wilderness lodge, reminiscent of a style popular in the national parks before World War II.

It was an increase in park attendance—and funding—that prompted the midcentury boom in visitor centers. The NPS's 50th anniversary in 1966 was the unofficial construction deadline, and the buildings (along with their style, an unprecedented attempt to bring modernism into proximity with nature) were dubbed "Mission 66."

The current push by NPS directors to replace or rusticate these buildings is a result of similar circumstances to the ones that created the Mission 66 program. "I can see the cycle starting all over," says Christine Madrid, a Charlottesville, Virginia, preservationist and former NPS employee who wrote her University of Virginia master's thesis on the Mission 66 buildings. Money started rolling into the NPS during the Clinton years, when user fees were raised and public-private partnerships encouraged. Even the architect of the \$4 million Bryce Canyon renovation, Wally Cooper, has misgivings about the project. "Certainly, there are people who will not be happy about it," he says. The NPS and the private group that has helped pay for the renovation "have this vision of what a park building should be and, boy, they pushed it hard." President Bush has recently pledged \$1 billion for park maintenance, which will probably doom more buildings.

"It's an extremely important moment," says Madrid, who has been trying to visit and document all 114 visitor centers while there's still time.



Modernism in the wild: Midcentury visitor centers like these are being outmoded and destroyed. Clockwise from top left: Glen Canyon National Recreation Area Visitor Center, Arizona (Cecil Doty, Western Office of Design and Construction, NPS, 1963–66); Gettysburg Cyclorama Building, Pennsylvania (Neutra & Alexander, 1961); Dinosaur National Monument Visitor Center, Utah (Anshen and Allen, 1957); Mesa Verde Far View Visitor Center, Colorado (Western Office of Design and Construction, NPS, with Joseph & Louise Marlowe, 1964–68).

Already, the Mt. Rushmore Visitor Center, seen in the Hitchcock classic *North by Northwest*, has been torn down. At Bryce Canyon, Madrid photographed the building's walls being ripped off.

According to the Cape Cod National Seashore's historian, William Burke, park officials "think in terms of accessibility and safety"—not style. Burke notes that for many Park Service employees, it's hard to think of saving these buildings. "Some of us are still learning to describe them as 'historically significant' without cringing," he says.

At the same time, preservationists have won some significant victories. Three Mission 66 buildings—visitor centers at Dinosaur National Monument in Utah (bottom right); Wright Brothers National Memorial in North Carolina; and an administration building at Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, by Taliesen Associated Architects—were named National Historic Landmarks earlier this year.

So far there's been no such luck at two Richard Neutra-designed

buildings: the visitor centers at Petrified Forest National Monument, in Arizona, and in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (top right). At Gettysburg, Park Service officials are planning to destroy the Cyclorama Building (designed by Neutra and Robert Alexander—see January 2000, page 27). In one of many letters to the advisory committee, architect Kevin Roche protested "there are enough fields in Gettysburg."

Madrid argues that the Park Service, which she feels has treated the buildings as some kind of anomaly—a "postwar mistake," in her words—should realize that Mission 66 was suited to its time. She believes in the need for compromise: Artful renovation can solve the buildings' functional deficiencies without resorting to wholesale destruction. Indeed, in Cape Cod, it appears the visitor center will be renovated in a way that preserves its soaring roof and giant windows. That's fine with Burke, who believes that "some of the buildings from that period should be saved. They shaped how people saw the parks for decades." ■