

# Sierra Sprawl

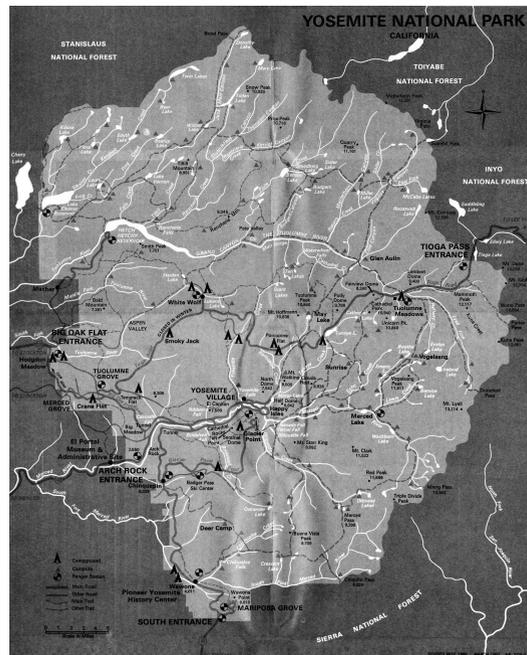
Yosemite's Age of Decentralization, 1956–1966

**ABSTRACT** Yosemite National Park's 1963 *Master Plan* contained some scandalous news: Yosemite Valley, hub of the American conservation movement, had become "almost urban in character." The postwar visitation boom brought traits typical of the Western metropolis: traffic, crime, and even occasional smog. But the valley's urbanization was only part of the story. Like many cities of the American West, the park sprouted its own hinterlands. While suburbs are generally considered detrimental to downtowns, the valley's satellites were meant to save the park's core.

**A**PPROVED IN the early 1960s, Yosemite National Park's *Master Plan* had some alarming—albeit unsurprising—news: years of "intensive use" had left Yosemite Valley "almost urban in character."<sup>1</sup> The park itself contained much more than just the valley: the subalpine ecosystem of Tuolumne Meadows, the dammed majesty of Hetch Hetchy, and the historic Mariposa Grove, part of the earliest Yosemite grant.<sup>2</sup> However, the park's roads, rivers, and trails funneled seemingly every living thing between the steep granite walls of Yosemite Valley. That this dense concentration of humanity suggested a city is not at all surprising. However, the implications of a metropolis within the boundaries of a national park deserve a second look. Linguistically, "nature" and "city" are binary opposites. They also carry separate moral connotations, "one pristine and unfallen, the other corrupt and unredeemed."<sup>3</sup> These disparate ideals lie at the heart of National Park Service (NPS) history.<sup>4</sup> Yosemite's *Master Plan* was finalized during the Mission 66 period, a decade-long (1956-1966) initiative aimed at increasing visitor access and modernizing national parks. Seeking at once to slow the valley's decline by developing outlying areas, and also to improve existing centralized services, Yosemite's Mission 66 goals were particularly paradoxical. The resulting tension between center and periphery mirrored the landscape opposites—low/high density, cities/suburbs—that historians ascribe to the post-World War II American West. The urbanization of Yosemite was inextricably connected to its decentralization.

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**FIGURE 1** Yosemite National Park, as represented in a 1969 NPS brochure

[http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/maps/yosemite\\_national\\_park\\_map\\_1969.jpg](http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/maps/yosemite_national_park_map_1969.jpg). Accessed May 5, 2015.

This article is about familiar patterns in unfamiliar places. I assert that parts of Yosemite displayed suburban traits, either in their appearance or their spatial dynamics.<sup>5</sup> I use the term “suburban” to address cultural landscape and, similarly, I use “sprawl” to connote extension or expansion.<sup>6</sup> Suburbanization—in which developers, builders, real estate agents, and homebuyers enabled politically and racially homogeneous environments—is a complex socioeconomic process with its own historiography and periodization. Decentralization, on the other hand, is a broad and recognizable pattern with deep federal roots.<sup>7</sup> I argue that the Mission 66 period represented a new manifestation of federally funded sprawl, echoing California and the postwar West at large.

Furthermore, this essay explores the overlap between urban and environmental history. Martin Melosi notes that urban environmental history “combines . . . the natural history of the city with the history of city building and their possible intersections.”<sup>8</sup> The natural history of Yosemite is exceedingly well documented; its feats of city building, however, receive less attention.<sup>9</sup> My inspiration in this regard stems largely from visitors’ voices.<sup>10</sup> However, as the *Master Plan* suggests, Yosemite Valley appeared urban to NPS administrators as well. Both parties take considerable liberties in defining a city, but that is precisely why their argument is worth pursuing. Known for waterfalls and granite walls, the valley also contains human-made spaces—the Ahwahnee Hotel, the Yosemite Valley Visitor Center, Curry Village—that are attractions in their own right. Although visitor-oriented, the valley also contains a post office, dentist, medical facilities, employee housing, offices, and a school. Tourists and residents alike can view art, hear a lecture, take a bus, shop for groceries, and talk to their neighbors.

While the valley is not a typical city, it can be used like one. Mission 66—a key moment in NPS planning history—marks the administrative recognition of this quasi-urban condition.

The 1963 criticism of an “urban” Yosemite emerged against a backdrop of nationwide decentralization that reflected doubts about the utility—and future—of the American downtown. The American West, long known for its wide-open spaces, urbanized exponentially after World War II; in fact, by 1970, 83 percent of the West’s population lived in urban areas—the highest percentage of the four U.S. regions.<sup>11</sup> California in particular excelled at turning rural land into cities.<sup>12</sup> Formerly agricultural counties like Los Angeles, Alameda, and San Diego grew rapidly, plowing under countless acres of farmland.<sup>13</sup> The amount of space transformed was shocking; for instance, from 1953 to 1959, San Bernardino County alone shifted 9,625 acres per year from rural to urban use.<sup>14</sup> California’s increasing dependence on the automobile proved essential in this equation, turning remote agricultural lands into desirable suburbs.<sup>15</sup> Instant neighborhoods were often accompanied by retail outlets of some kind, constituting a more or less self-sufficient node. These spacious landscapes represented an alternative to “the highly restricted confines of the core,” providing ample reason for citizens to neglect urban centers altogether.<sup>16</sup> Decentralization sparked widespread criticism of “formless” and “sprawling” development, “chaotic” landscapes infected by a general sense of “anomie.”<sup>17</sup> Conversely, suburbanites criticized urban centers, which “epitomiz[ed] many of the evils associated with modern American society.”<sup>18</sup> The addition of the interstate highway system only decreased the spatial and temporal distance between these oppositional landscapes. Formerly implying a relationship *with* the city, “suburban” came to express a distinction *from* it.<sup>19</sup>

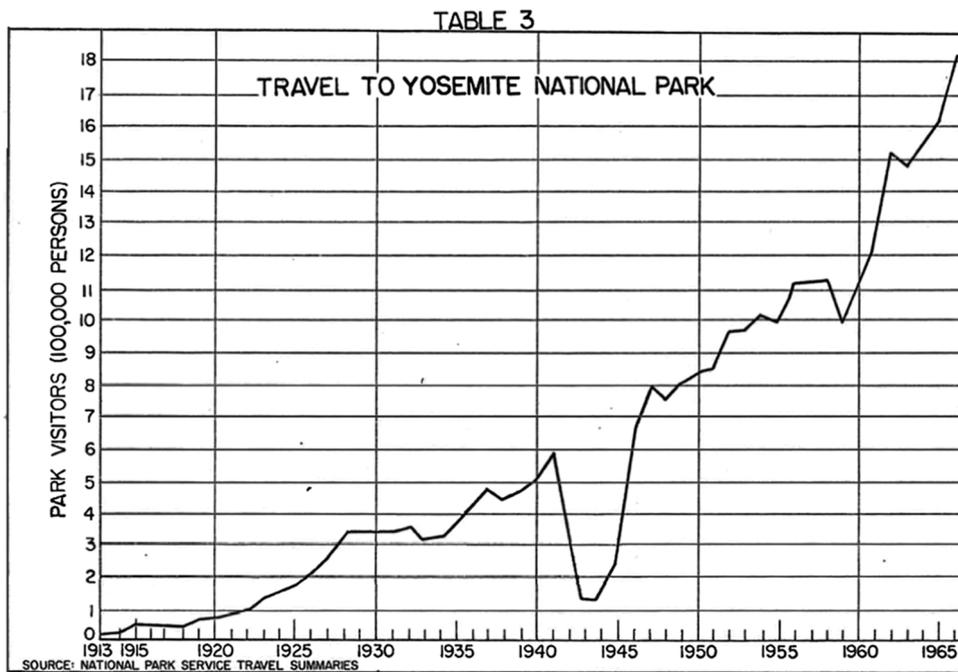


FIGURE 2 Travel to Yosemite, 1913-1966, Fitzsimmons, “Effect,” 8

Image by Alan Fitzsimmons

At first glance, national parks have little in common with these trends. The Mission 66 program, born of midcentury America's sociopolitical climate, showed otherwise. Wartime—specifically the rationing of fuel, rubber, and other war material—slowed national park visitation. Visitation skyrocketed after these restrictions were lifted, and the NPS had to accommodate increased visitation with a budget at (or even below) its wartime levels.<sup>20</sup> Park facilities, already antiquated, were sorely tested by their new popularity. Pundits actually advocated closing the nation's parks—at least until they could be adequately funded.<sup>21</sup> Once charged with creating sanctuaries, the NPS became responsible for increasing visitor access and enjoyment—in other words, creating theme parks.

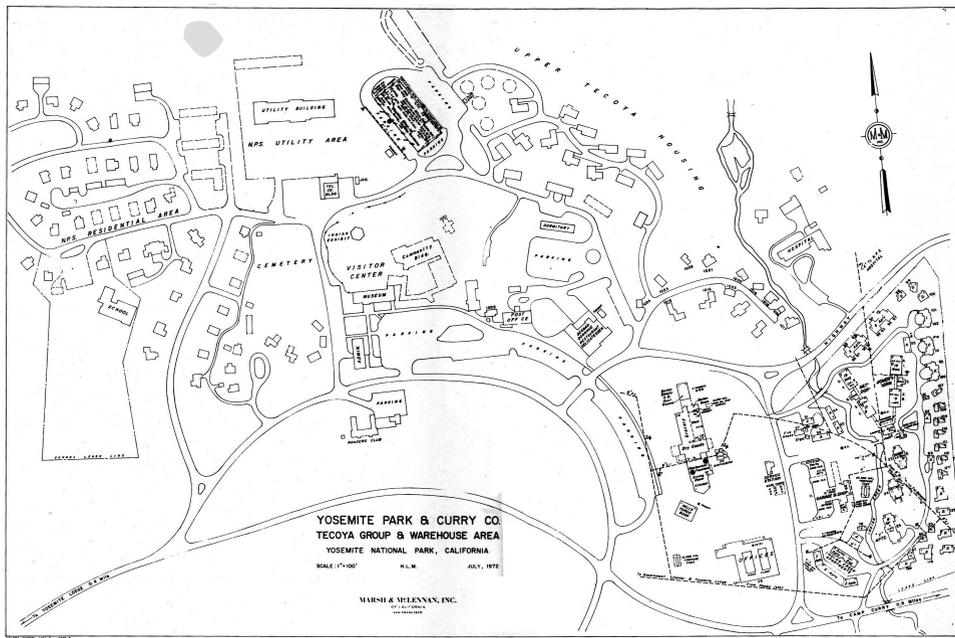
Much of Mission 66 funding went to new roads, restrooms, parking lots, and campgrounds. However, some saw these shiny additions as an abandonment of the trademark rustic architectural style of the nation's parks.<sup>22</sup> These complaints were not without merit, as Mission 66 consciously incorporated modern urban planning into stereotypically anti-urban environs. Traditionalists decried the advent of visitor centers, multipurpose facilities that incorporated visitor assistance, research libraries, staff offices, parking, restrooms, and even movie theaters. Above all, these one-stop conveniences “sought to make centralized services accessible to large numbers of people arriving in cars.”<sup>23</sup> Ethan Carr, a historian of Mission 66, asserts that criticism of the program must be taken in context:

National park development constituted a part—as did tracts of residential development, shopping centers, and highway construction—of an overall modern landscape that was beginning to reach its ultimate extent across the entire continent during the postwar decades. In this sense, the history of the modernization of national park landscapes must be seen in the context of the modernization of the American landscape generally, including contemporary trends in housing subdivisions, commercial and corporate ‘centers,’ and interstate highway engineering.<sup>24</sup>

Simply put, midcentury parks increasingly mirrored the world outside their boundaries. They were still sanctuaries, but they were also contemporary American landscapes.

Yosemite's Mission 66 plan was somewhat of an outlier. While many parks attempted to centralize their visitor services, Yosemite Valley demanded a different tactic.<sup>25</sup> An outline of an earlier *Master Plan* recommended “gradual decentral[ization]” of the valley, which was “rapidly approaching the saturation point.” By 1952, seven hundred cars and twenty-three hundred people entered the valley each day; over the five summer months, those numbers more than doubled. Some facilities suffered more than others, like campgrounds that were left temporarily fallow to allow for “rest period[s].”<sup>26</sup> While many other western parks experienced similar crowding, few were as compact. Yosemite, expected to receive two million visitors by 1966, had to cram most of them into the far east end of the valley.<sup>27</sup> Rather than simply improve the visitor experience, Mission 66 plans attempted to alter the park's deeply ingrained patterns of visitation.

The lack of other major attractions was a crucial sticking point. From the park's inception, Yosemite Valley captured all the attention: early entrepreneurs constructed lodging, builders vied to provide access, and artists acquainted the nation with its beauty. The valley's built environment gradually grew in complexity and size. Park planners crammed buildings and roads into what was essentially a small canyon, creating new districts in what little space remained.<sup>28</sup> This centralization eventually became a problem. Foremost among Yosemite's Mission 66



**FIGURE 3** Yosemite Village c. 1972. Notice the way that the cemetery and circulation system separate residential neighborhoods from the retail/administrative core. Also note the curvilinear roads in the residential neighborhoods, suggestive of a bucolic suburb.

[http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/yosemite\\_resources/images/illustration\\_233.jpg](http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/yosemite_resources/images/illustration_233.jpg). Accessed December 4, 2014.

goals was the removal of *any* excess clutter to locations outside the valley.<sup>29</sup> As such, satellite communities like El Portal—a small town on the park’s southwestern edge—suddenly became much more desirable. Park planners also sought to change the *way* in which the Valley was used. A new and improved road system promised to decrease transit times between major attractions; if visitors could experience the park in an “efficient” manner, then they might “limit [their] stay voluntarily.”<sup>30</sup> This is where the new visitor-center paradigm paid dividends. With services concentrated in one multipurpose facility, visitors could get the *entire* valley experience—all within walking distance of their parking space.<sup>31</sup> The prototypical postwar western city had two parts: an old, troubled downtown, and thriving suburbs connected via a modern highway system.<sup>32</sup> Yosemite’s Mission 66 plans aimed to create a similar dynamic.

Yosemite’s unique political situation further distinguished it from other western parks. Since 1928, Yosemite had employed its own board of experts—essentially a think tank composed of planners, architects, natural scientists, and other public intellectuals. In 1945, NPS director Newton B. Drury challenged the board to consider a suggestion posed by Thomas C. Vint, the agency’s chief planner: remove development from Yosemite Valley altogether. Frank Kittredge, Yosemite’s superintendent at the time, railed against the valley’s “carnival aspects”: dance halls, jazz bands, cocktail lounges, and other urban attractions. Removal of these attractions would cause those seeking “city type” activities to deem the park “dead” and—hopefully—look elsewhere for entertainment.<sup>33</sup> In 1946, the board’s reply came: although they were “wholly in sympathy” with Vint and Kittredge’s wishes, removing the “heart of the park” was “too great a sacrifice to make.”<sup>34</sup>

The seeds for this decision were sown early in Yosemite's history. National parks, and western parks in particular, were important agents of the late nineteenth-century tourist trade.<sup>35</sup> Free enterprise ruled until the creation of the NPS, which eventually awarded specific concessioner contracts. Concessioners sold almost anything within park boundaries—food, liquor, lodging, souvenirs, laundry, and even bicycle rentals.<sup>36</sup> They also peddled something less tangible: influence regarding the built environment. This relationship between conservation and commerce acquired new importance during the Mission 66 era. In 1956, the NPS asserted that lodging and other concession services would be provided inside parks *only* if bordering communities could not satisfactorily do so.<sup>37</sup> However, this hard-line stance conflicted with the interests of park concessioners, all of whom relied upon overnight guests for their primary income.<sup>38</sup> Not only did they reap profits from lodging, but hotels and motels ensured longer stays, which increased the profits of other concessioner services.<sup>39</sup> Conrad Wirth, NPS director after Drury, recognized this threat and went on record touting the importance of “greater participation of private enterprise” in Mission 66. The same report stressed the removal of overnight facilities from “major park features.”<sup>40</sup> This was far more lenient than demanding their removal to outlying areas.

As Mission 66 progressed, the NPS continued to soften its stance on lodging. The program's final report stated that, of thirty large parks, only four—those “favorably located to permit private enterprise to provide accommodations outside”—would phase out overnight accommodations within their boundaries.<sup>41</sup> Although it conflicted with the park's decentralizing mandate, Yosemite Valley's lodging stayed put. Contradictions usually expose deeper truths, and this one is no different. The tradition of centralized services—essentially downtowns—was as old as the NPS itself. Like many western parks, Yosemite possessed a long history of tourist activity, scenic attributes capitalized by private enterprise, a lack of extra-park services, and a road system that accommodated auto tourism.<sup>42</sup> In turn, these factors led to concentrated combinations of retail, lodging, interpretive services, employee housing and NPS offices—powerful cores that met both concessioner *and* NPS needs. For employees, these urban areas offered “not only employment but such services as housing, recreation, schools, churches, and post offices, and to visitors provided for daily basic and often nonbasic needs.”<sup>43</sup> While a noble goal, decentralization threatened the delicate symbiosis between federal administration and private capital.

Yosemite Village, the park's multipurpose downtown, was one such central place. Originally located on the south side of the valley, the village moved to the northern side in the 1920s. This new location provided more warmth and—more importantly—more room for future expansion.<sup>44</sup> The new village quickly became the administrative center of the park, containing essential NPS functions as well as numerous photographic studios.<sup>45</sup> Like many downtown districts, it was only in operation during business hours. This changed in the Mission 66 era, when the village began to provide food and groceries for visitors. Degnan's, a Yosemite Village staple, opened a new branch in 1958, a two-story structure housing a coffee shop, restaurant, and grocery store. A monstrous new structure arrived in 1959, roughly half of it dedicated to the Village Store—a full-service grocery and souvenir outlet.<sup>46</sup> The rest of the building contained a barber, a beauty shop, and a laundry, as well as another coffee shop and restaurant.<sup>47</sup> There were no hotels or tourist camps in the village, but that was the point: its vast array of services augmented preexisting concessioner lodging.



**FIGURE 4** New housing (c. 1958) around Yosemite Village. Notice the curvilinear tree-lined streets creating a sense of sequestration from the street. Fitzsimmons, "Effect," 78.

Photo by Alan Fitzsimmons

As a coterie of retailers grew around its two “anchor stores,” the village began to resemble a shopping center. Like Mission 66 planners, many postwar retailers strove to evoke both center and periphery, providing metropolitan amenities without urban problems.<sup>48</sup> Successful malls, then, took their cues from “the downtown department store, Main Street, and the open-air market.”<sup>49</sup> Despite its downtown location, Yosemite Village possessed a suburban vocabulary. Its buildings, arranged in a horseshoe shape, rarely exceeded two stories. Parking and roads provided easy circulation.<sup>50</sup> By 1964, a new approach road for the Village Store was in place; a new parking lot behind the post office was added the same year.<sup>51</sup> A semicircular road arched through the village, with three major parking lots providing immediate access to the Village Store, Degnan’s, and the Visitor Center/Museum complex. Like many malls, the village’s goal was “to divorce customers from their automobiles as quickly as possible.”<sup>52</sup> Visitors could stroll from errand to errand in a self-contained pedestrian environment.<sup>53</sup> The valley’s urban development was packaged in a suburban retail vocabulary.

However, the village was more than just a commercial hub. The commercial architectural directives of the Mission 66 period stressed multiple-use shopping environments. Famed architect and planner Victor Gruen posited that successful malls included “the widest possible palette of human experiences and urban expressions.” The inclusion of “as many non-retail urban functions...as feasible” created an “atmosphere which in itself becomes an attraction for the inhabitants of a region.”<sup>54</sup> Mission 66 planners recognized the need for interpretive features to augment the dominant concessioner presence, leading to a revamped Visitor Center, complete with two auditoriums.<sup>55</sup> Designed by Eldridge Spencer, architect of the Yosemite Lodge, it was completed in 1967.<sup>56</sup> This new complex served as a “focal point of visitor contact,” providing “attractive new exhibits,” “free and for-sale literature,” and a “self-guiding Wildflower Garden.”<sup>57</sup> Yosemite Village blurred the line between retail and education, presenting natural history as yet another feature of a multipurpose mall environment.

These interpretive aids were designed with an increasingly urban visitor profile in mind. Ethan Carr argues that visitor centers repurposed the shopping center form, providing centralized services with incomparable automotive accessibility.<sup>58</sup> This environment should have been familiar to all visitors—and yet, park officials worried about their charges. Yosemite’s new Visitor Center became a way to acquaint tourists “with elements of nature that could otherwise be strange and frightening.”<sup>59</sup> The valley’s built environment, then, formed a bridge to understanding its less urban—even wild—surroundings: trees, meadows, cliffs, deer, and even bears. Visitors were to engage with the natural environment through a recognizable retail landscape. If tourists acquired this information quickly, they would shorten their stay in the valley; in this sense, the Visitor Center fit into the decentralizationist paradigm. On the other hand, a concentrated center of interpretive expertise could never be removed to an outlying area. The Visitor Center *was* central—that was the point. The village’s retail functions were essential to the concessioner, and its interpretive functions were immensely important to the NPS. The result was a deeply entrenched urban place that could never be exported to the valley’s hinterlands.

Simply put, Yosemite Village was necessary. Its retail sector fed the neighboring concessioner lodging. Its interpretive services oriented tourists to their new surroundings. As a whole, the complex resembled a suburban shopping center—detached from the city, but possessing its amenities. The architectural historian Richard Longstreth deems midcentury



**FIGURE 5** Auto entry at the Lodge, c. 1960. Note the swooping roofline and the open, inviting circulation system. U.S. National Park Service, *A Sense of Place*, 145

malls “total environment[s],” places that mimicked a city’s activity level but provided another degree of residential—even bucolic—charm. He describes Lakewood, a shopping mall incorporated with the single-family neighborhoods around it:

Lakewood’s most striking physical departure stemmed from its comprehensive land use program . . . Lakewood’s boulevards were generously landscaped, with access roads as buffers between them and the dwellings. Trees and shrubs were planted in great number. Churches, schools, and other institutions were closely related to the housing fabric around them. Commercial activities not only were limited to a single precinct but were separated from other land uses. The guaranteed neighborhood became a product of mass consumption.<sup>60</sup>

Yosemite Village, too, formed a “virtually complete community” by fusing commercial and residential functions. Neighborhoods to the north and east of the complex’s core showed another side of the valley’s urban nature. Its residents—many of them year-round employees—could walk to work, school, medical facilities, public utilities, parking, and government services.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the residential neighborhoods enjoyed a sense of privacy, distancing themselves from the madding crowd but enjoying similar access privileges. The segregation of land use into administrative, residential, and commercial zones—achieved via buffers both conspicuous and subtle—created a distinct residential community to augment the bustling commercial activity.<sup>62</sup>

Many of these residences themselves were products of Mission 66. Directly north of the village sat a cluster of single-family homes along prototypically curvilinear roads. Stylistically,

these dwellings mirrored the Mission 66 era in a Bay Area vocabulary: attached garages, rectangular massing, flat roofs, large single-pane windows, and secluded siting.<sup>63</sup> NPS guidelines mandated this concealment: both government and concessioner housing was to be “concentrated in a planned residential community out of public view.”<sup>64</sup> The construction of a school (1955), a fire department (1957), and garden plots for employees on the western edge of the village further encouraged this distinct neighborhood identity.<sup>65</sup> There were close to one thousand year-round employees living in the new village’s “suburbs” by 1966; this number swelled to two thousand during the busy summer months.<sup>66</sup> Although the village was retail-oriented, many services—like the school, hospital, and post office—were devoted entirely to the employee population. New roads also served valley residents. Between 1913 and 1966, the valley’s primary road system actually decreased in mileage; the auxiliary network, however, almost tripled in the same timespan, indicating new development away from central park attractions.<sup>67</sup> The village’s residential neighborhoods were in the most impacted area of the valley, yet they stood apart through their self-sufficiency and overall segregation from the commercial environment.<sup>68</sup> By 1966, then, bucolic housing stock existed on the periphery of the valley’s downtown. It was a postwar western city in miniature.

Mission 66 reinforced the valley’s urban identity, but it also employed the architecture of the commercial strip. Planners throughout the NPS adopted the motel, an outgrowth of the interstate system, in an attempt to connect with a mobile but budget-conscious public.<sup>69</sup> The number of motels in the United States climbed steadily after World War II. In 1954, there were almost thirty thousand; by 1961, there were over sixty thousand.<sup>70</sup> Roads and cars were crucial in this growth, but other less visible factors also played a role. Compared to most other types of real estate investment, motels produced a higher cash flow; thus, any debt incurred in building them could be easily amortized. New motels also appreciated rapidly and could be sold for large profits. As a result, lending institutions usually required only small cash down payments.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the 1954 tax code included lenient provisions for accelerated depreciation, which meant that two-thirds of a motel’s construction cost could be written off in five years. Like other forms of auto-oriented commercial development, motels were particularly attractive as safeguards against inflation.<sup>72</sup> They were easy to build, easy to finance, and easy to resell.

These economic conditions helped Hilmer Oehlmann, president of the Yosemite Park & Curry Company, secure \$1 million dollars in funding for the new Yosemite Lodge<sup>73</sup>—before the park could even prepare its first Mission 66 prospectus.<sup>74</sup> Completed in 1956, the Lodge—featuring exposed steel framing, large glass panes, and low-slung pitched roofs—represented a drastic departure from the NPS’s famed rustic style.<sup>75</sup> Rather than mirror the natural environment, such materials facilitated panoramic views of surrounding landmarks.<sup>76</sup> The complex featured a central reservation area containing a coffee shop, cafeteria, restaurant, souvenir shop, lounge, and outdoor amphitheater, marking the lodge as an entertainment area as well as an overnight destination.<sup>77</sup> Outlying clusters of one- and two-story motel units orbited this nucleus. A major arterial road ran straight through the grounds, separating central services from outlying accommodations; a smaller network of curvilinear service roads parceled the property into residential neighborhoods.<sup>78</sup> Parking lots scattered along the singular entrance allowed visitors to leave their cars promptly.<sup>79</sup> Around 1962, a spate of “guest cottages” were constructed as



The NPS clearly believed that such opposites could coexist on a large scale. Yosemite Lodge and the new village, the valley's most visible Mission 66 additions, did not follow the decentralizationist paradigm. Yet even as they strengthened Yosemite's downtown, park planners endeavored to remove the valley's clutter. "Trailer camps" serving as employee housing were scheduled for relocation to El Portal and Wawona.<sup>85</sup> The number of campsites in the valley would stay the same, but the number outside was to be tripled.<sup>86</sup> A modernization of Tioga Road across the Sierra and a new visitor center at Tuolumne Meadows further promised to draw crowds away from the park's most impacted resource.<sup>87</sup> Services could not be removed from the valley, but they could be strategically provided elsewhere.

From its early days, Yosemite—like many national parks—welcomed automobiles with open arms. Historian David Louter describes the NPS philosophy of "preservation *through* development," which held that roads actually *enhanced* their surrounding scenery.<sup>88</sup> Yosemite had long experienced this contradictory relationship between development and preservation. Even before the automobile, the park's road network focused visitor attention toward the valley—thereby enabling the visitation that created large grassroots efforts to form, and later to protect, the park.<sup>89</sup> The completion of the Tioga Road promised similarly contradictory results. On one hand, civilizing the middle twenty-one miles<sup>90</sup> would create a "major" highway, funneling even more visitors into the valley; on the other, it would create new distractions—like White Wolf and Tuolumne Meadows—that might slow the trampling of the park's downtown. This conundrum mirrored the West's postwar landscape. As historian John Findlay notes, automobiles were almost *too* effective as agents of decentralization:

One of the most visible consequences of autos was their impact on downtown centers. They tended to heighten the importance of larger cities at the expense of nearby smaller towns, while within the metropolis they weakened the power of the central business district. Rapid growth, population dispersal, and urban annexation had already begun to erode the primacy of downtowns; cars added their horsepower to the work and intensified the damage to the traditional urban core. Throughout the West old central business districts diminished in appeal as new office, shopping, and government centers flourished away from midtown.<sup>91</sup>

The triumph of the periphery in the postwar West promised to alleviate traffic in crowded downtowns—so effectively, in fact, that it threatened their very existence. Similarly, a modernized Tioga Road promised to create new objects of fascination for visitors. Planners could only hope for the valley to diminish in appeal.

Park officials were also guided by a desire to expand their reach. With a new lifeline to the Eastern Sierra, communities like Bridgeport and Bishop were no longer distant neighbors—they became cooperators. In 1958, Yosemite superintendent John C. Preston wrote the regional director that "good public relations are essential to the continued success of the Mission 66 program." He proposed to attend multiple chamber of commerce meetings on the East Side of the Sierra in order to drum up more support for the park's Mission 66 plans.<sup>92</sup> Eventually, the California Department of Highways eventually agreed to upgrade the route from Lee Vining to Tioga Pass—thereby connecting the park's newly renovated Highway 120 to its state-owned counterpart.<sup>93</sup> The completion of the Tioga Road in 1961 decentralized Yosemite's power, offering new opportunities for improving access, even via routes outside the park.<sup>94</sup> The new road increased the park's spatial footprint, drawing external polities into its orbit.

Besides highway building, park officials had another technology of decentralization up their sleeve: annexation. As John Findlay explains, many postwar cities purchased “outlying parcels of land for parks, roads, reservoirs, and other municipal purposes before it was needed or built upon.”<sup>95</sup> This ensured cheaper land that provided room to grow. In the same vein, Yosemite’s Mission 66 plans stressed acquisition of private lands within park boundaries on the grounds that they “conflicted with public enjoyment and that maximum public use dictated their acquisition.”<sup>96</sup> In 1958, though, Superintendent Preston confessed the acquisition program was “making rather slow progress.”<sup>97</sup> The park was in a bind. Wawona, a historic community near the park’s southern entrance, was a well-known stronghold of private land claims. On one hand, the area represented an opportunity to draw crowds away from the valley; on the other, increased development would no doubt raise the government’s eventual purchase price. Loosely regulated subdivisions of vacation homes were already sprouting at an alarming rate. To combat this rapid growth, officials considered amending the Code of Federal Regulations to prohibit construction on private lands within the park that did not conform to established fire districts within California. While it was true that “haphazard” construction of “cabins, shacks, and summer homes” increased Wawona’s fire danger, Yosemite officials had ulterior motives for limiting private development in the area.<sup>98</sup> This attempt to limit low-quality sprawl was ahead of its time; however, the rationale was not so noble. Contrary to the prevailing dynamics of the postwar era, areas like Wawona were potentially saviors of—and not antagonists to—Yosemite’s downtown.

Wawona was important for other reasons besides the private land battle. Its distance from Yosemite Valley, along with established attractions like the Mariposa Grove and a historic hotel, made it a logical candidate for decentralization. The Mission 66 program called for returning the site of Old Yosemite Village to “natural” conditions, which meant that its most historic structures would be razed or removed. The Wells Fargo building and the powder house were transferred to Wawona, where planners attempted to fashion a more rustic vision of Yosemite’s history.<sup>99</sup> Wawona already had historic sites, like a covered bridge, a wagon shop, and of course its hotel; it received eight more historic buildings in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Each represented a different stage of Yosemite’s development: pioneering, homesteading, rail transport, early hotels, the Army administration, and the nascent national park years. Crews spent six years moving and refurbishing these structures, which would officially open as the Pioneer History Center in 1961.<sup>100</sup> Its importance as a secondary visitor attraction trumped anxieties about the eventual purchase price. Despite its connection to the urban Valley, the park’s historic preservation efforts at Wawona evoked a bucolic Yosemite. Underneath a simple interpretive strategy lay the same tension between center and periphery manifested in the park’s Mission 66 plans—and the American West at large.

Mission 66 targeted another community outside Yosemite Valley, this time for residential purposes. El Portal, a small town along the all-weather Highway 140, began its life as the terminus of the Yosemite Valley Railroad. It was originally a “transfer point for tourists visiting Yosemite by rail,” but it also contained scores of railroad employee housing constructed between 1905 and 1915.<sup>101</sup> Long after the car supplanted the railroad as the primary method of access, El Portal assumed a different kind of significance—one that the *Oakland Tribune* asserted would make it “the biggest little city in California.”<sup>102</sup> Mission 66 plans to remove “supporting facilities” hinged upon the acquisition of El Portal.<sup>103</sup> First, though, a patchwork

of United States Forest Service land claims would have to be negotiated. After the Yosemite Valley Railroad was abandoned in 1945, the El Portal Mining Company—a branch of the National Lead Company—acquired title to El Portal. The NPS was able to purchase the town in 1958.<sup>104</sup> Like Wawona, this land grab required a delicate balancing of federal power and private capital. Furthermore, both acquisition efforts announced the newfound importance of Yosemite's satellite communities as safety valves for the valley's unbridled development.

Throughout the postwar years, valley employee housing consisted of "trailer camps," usually sited between the Merced River and the Yosemite Valley road loop. El Portal offered an alternative to this eyesore. Construction of government housing began there in early 1961, followed by a new bridge across the Merced River; a new sewage disposal facility and water plant were built the same year.<sup>105</sup> A trailer village with over sixty sites augmented the eighty employee homes that had been constructed. Plans for a five-classroom school, as well as a "village center" with a post office, motel, and church, signaled the NPS's intention to build another "complete community" like that at Yosemite Village.<sup>106</sup> This new town, however, would be a bedroom community, allowing employees a short commute to and from their crowded duty station. One obvious downside of El Portal's location was its elevation, roughly two thousand feet lower than Yosemite Valley. The town would thus require "refrigerated housing necessary for comfortable summer living."<sup>107</sup> Such a disadvantage did not dampen optimism regarding the new employee community. Wawona showed the NPS's adeptness at creating new historical collages, refashioning the past to distract from the present. El Portal, however, demonstrated the agency's willingness to create a hybrid model community/company town.

All around Mission 66-era Yosemite, small portions of the postwar western landscape were reproduced in miniature. The village was simply a shopping mall orbited by a residential community. Yosemite Lodge was a classic roadside motel, born of the automobile age. Wawona and El Portal were safety valves, outlying communities that offered different visions of park life. The Tioga Road, and other park highways in general, formed the connective tissue. Each of these smaller landscapes contributed to a larger tableau: the latest iteration of federally-funded community building. Of course, the NPS could not have reshaped Yosemite's landscape without help from the park concessioner. This marriage of private capital and federal planning facilitated urban place-making and rural development, but—most importantly—it played on the latent decentralization of the American landscape in an attempt to reroute traditional patterns of tourism. National parks have long beckoned as refuges from our daily lives; yet Mission 66 development in Yosemite demonstrates that parks do not entirely filter out the world beyond their boundaries.

Was this tactical decentralization effective? Evidence suggests that it played a role in altering Yosemite's tourist landscape. Allan Fitzsimmons asserted that 60 percent of visitors in the 1950s stayed overnight; by 1975, however, only 40 percent stayed longer than one day.<sup>108</sup> He also noted that usage of concessioner lodging reached its peak in 1962—and remained relatively stable until 1975.<sup>109</sup> Elimination of valley overflow camping in the late 1960s further aided decentralization efforts.<sup>110</sup> By 1970, campsites outside the valley had increased in popularity.<sup>111</sup> El Portal has since expanded its residential capacity to serve the park's growing workforce. Wawona remains the park's second most prominent concentration of attractions. The Tioga Road is still an essential trans-Sierra route, serving visitors from as far north

as Reno and as far south as San Diego; attractions along the controversial 1961 stretch of road have blossomed into major tourist draws. And, of course, Yosemite Valley still receives millions of visitors each year. That will not change any time soon.

Efforts at decentralization could never *truly* succeed in Yosemite. All the same, Mission 66 planning from 1956 to 1966 deserves close attention. In both scholarship and lore, Yosemite is lauded as a special place. This is true. Special, however, also connotes a sense of remoteness and separation. By midcentury, Yosemite's days of isolation were long gone. Its park boundaries were not, and are not, hermetic seals; they are permeable membranes, allowing the "outside world" to enter in all its forms. Park planners used Yosemite as a laboratory, testing the West's prevailing developmental models in a controlled environment. The National Park Service often interprets its sites as utterly unique from their surrounding landscapes. Perhaps it is time to more fully acknowledge its success in creating usable environments, understandable even to first-time visitors. Highways, arterials, motels, malls, and bedroom communities—these things exist everywhere, even in California's most iconic natural landscape. We fear to acknowledge these connections, thinking that we might break an ancient spell. Why not celebrate Yosemite as it *is*, and not as we wish it to be?

#### NOTES

1. JS Adams, DS Hubbard, CH Hackett, *Master Plan for the Preservation and Use of Yosemite National Park* (1963). Yosemite National Park Resource Management Records (RMR), Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 1.
2. See Figure 1 for a map of the park.
3. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1992), 8.
4. A well-worn passage from the 1916 Organic Act (which created the National Park Service) states that the NPS shall endeavor "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life 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." <<http://www.nps.gov/grba/parkmgmt/organic-act-of-1916.htm>> Accessed December 4, 2014.
5. However, this should not be confused with the process of decentralization at the article's core.
6. I make no attempt to engage with the cultural baggage each term carries today. Suburbs are difficult to pin down. They can be defined by: "... political status (independent municipalities outlying a larger urban center); economic and social function (dependence on a central city, especially dormitory communities of urban commuters); landscape and the built environment (the predominance of single-family homes with lawns, curvilinear streets, and other aesthetic symbols of harmony with nature); ideology and way of life (places shaped by elevated values for homeownership, secluded nuclear families, privacy, a distinctive, gendered division of labor, social exclusivity, semirural landscapes, dislike of cities, political home rule, etc.); and process of development (the decentralization of population, jobs, and other urban functions from an older city core)." Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, introduction to *The Suburb Reader*, eds. Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese (New York: Routledge, 2006), 7.
7. Loans guaranteed by the Federal Housing Authority are often cited as one of the biggest causes of postwar decentralization. However, some prewar entities—like the Home Owners' Loan Corporation and the Housing Act of 1937—also helped to racialize housing policy and facilitate the emptying of urban cores. Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 195–219. It is important not to forget the Interstate Highway System. See Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).
8. Martin Melosi, "The Place of the City in Environmental History," *Environmental History Review* 17, no. 1 (1993), 1 [If entire article, okay; if not a comma should be used instead of a colon].
9. Seminal works include Francois Mathes, *Geologic History of the Yosemite Valley* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1930); John Muir, *The Yosemite* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962); Bill Guyton, *Glaciers of California: Modern Glaciers, Ice Age Glaciers, Origin of Yosemite Valley, and a Glacier Tour of the Sierra Nevada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and N. King Huber, *The Geologic Story of Yosemite National Park* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1987).
10. Throughout the 1960s, visitor complaints of smog, traffic, "tent slums," and "instant cit[ies]" were quite common. This indicates a dissatisfaction with the park environment, but also widespread fluency with anti-urban (and, implicitly, pro-suburban) arguments of the postwar era. See Guy McClellan, "Hippies in the Park:

- Yosemite and the Counterculture in the Sixties American West” (master’s thesis, University of New Mexico, 2014), 73–76.
11. John Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes in American Culture After 1940* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1993), 1.
  12. Geographer Allan K. Fitzsimmons estimated that, by the 1970s, 75 percent of Yosemite’s visitors were Californians. Thus, many of the tourists seeing the transition from rural to urban inside the park had likely seen it elsewhere. Allan K. Fitzsimmons, *Central Place Development in Western National Parks* (PhD diss., UCLA, 1975), 107–108.
  13. From 1940–1950, Los Angeles County’s population grew by 136,604 people/4.9 percent; Alameda County, 26,546 people/5.2 percent; and San Diego County, 26,746 people/9.2 percent. From 1950–1960, L.A. County’s population grew by 188,708 people/4.5 percent; Alameda County, 16,789 people/2.3 percent; San Diego County, 47,620 people/8.6 percent. Henry W. Dill, “Urbanization of Land in the Western States” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1970), 9.
  14. *Ibid.*, 29.
  15. By 1950, California had four million registered automobiles; by 1966, the state contained over nine million (from author’s personal correspondence with the California Department of Motor Vehicles). Allan K. Fitzsimmons, “The Effect of the Automobile on the Cultural Landscape Elements of Yosemite Valley” (master’s thesis, San Fernando Valley State College, 1969), 2.
  16. Richard Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), xiv.
  17. Findlay, 6–7.
  18. *Ibid.*, 20.
  19. Jackson, 272.
  20. Ethan Carr, *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 3–5.
  21. See Bernard DeVoto, “Let’s Close the National Parks,” *Harper’s* October 1 (1953): 49–52.
  22. Carr, 12–13.
  23. *Ibid.*
  24. *Ibid.*, 47.
  25. Fitzsimmons, “Effect,” 118.
  26. Master Plan Development Outline, 1952. RMR Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 1.
  27. Carr, 245–246. See Figure 2 for Yosemite’s visitation statistics.
  28. Between 1913 and 1966, Yosemite Valley’s road mileage increased from 24 miles to 32.5 miles. During roughly the same period (1918–1966), the valley’s structure count increased from 100 to 520. While many of these new structures were built by park concessionaires, the NPS had to facilitate the infrastructural linkages. Fitzsimmons, “Effect,” 68, 90.
  29. “Operations not essential to the welfare of the visitor will be moved to the Park’s operating base at El Portal, outside of the Valley and private lands will be acquired to provide additional accommodations outside of the Valley, vis., campgrounds, trailer camps, housekeeping and motel type accommodations.” *Master Plan* (1963).
  30. *Ibid.*
  31. Carr, 220.
  32. Findlay, 44.
  33. Alred Runte, *Yosemite: Embattled Wilderness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 190.
  34. Carr, 246.
  35. See Marguerite Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).
  36. “There was no precedent and no model in the 1870s and the mood of the nation toward the end of the 19th century was one of free enterprise, so that whatever government could do the businessman could do better. Thus privately owned concessions were authorized to provide services to park visitors at sites within the parks from the very beginnings . . . The in-park provision of these tourist services has often led to the evolution of urban places in today’s park landscapes . . .” Fitzsimmons, *Central*, 2.
  37. Carr, 233.
  38. “Closely tied with the overnight facilities are several associated services. Prepared food and curio or gift shops are always present when overnight lodgings are offered . . . This situation is not surprising considering that lodge users must eat and concessioners are often highly dependent on high profit gift sales to secure a profit for their overall park operation . . . [I]t is quite likely that the park visitor that has sufficient funds to use the concessioner lodgings also has a relatively large gift budget and care has been taken to place gift operations in locations readily accessible to the lodger.” Fitzsimmons, *Central*, 303.
  39. Carr, 233.
  40. *Ibid.*, 234.
  41. Using a simplified visitor demand formula, NPS officials argued for an increase in lodging. The result: a spike in total pillow count in twenty-six parks from 23,797 to 58,797. *Ibid.*, 242.

42. Fitzsimmons, *Central*, 375.
43. *Ibid.*, 3.
44. Fitzsimmons, “Effect,” 73.
45. Linda Greene, *Historic Resource Study: Yosemite National Park, California*, Volume 2 of 3 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1987), 583. <<https://archive.org/details/historicresourceooyos2>> Accessed November 15, 2014.
46. The cost of these buildings together totaled \$1.5 million, the largest single expenditure in the concessioner’s history. “New Store at Yosemite Now Open,” *Bakersfield Californian*, May 5, 1959.
47. Fitzsimmons, “Effect,” 74, 79.
48. The famed mall designer Victor Gruen (1903-1980) was renowned for creating “total environments,” enabled “by widespread automobile use while excluding the negative effects of traffic . . .” Longstreth, 324.
49. *Ibid.*
50. See Figure 3 for an image of the village’s circulatory system.
51. Land and Community Associates, “Yosemite Valley Cultural Landscape Report” (Denver: U.S. Department of the Interior, Denver Service Center), 2–114 [reference unclear, do you mean to cite all pages between 2 and 114?] [the number ‘2’ does indeed indicate volume number; however, each page of these landscape reports is numbered with the volume (2) followed by a page number (114), which are separated by a hyphen. I will defer to the journal regarding the styling of these citations—I have never encountered a document numbered in this way.]
52. Longstreth, 308.
53. The large parking plaza—consisting of three contiguous lots—was removed in 1972 in order to create a pedestrian plaza. “Cultural Landscape Report,” 2–114 [reference unclear, do you mean to cite all pages between 2 and 114?]. [see endnote 51]
54. Howard Gillette, Jr., “The Evolution of the Planned Shopping Center in Suburb and City,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 51, no. 4 (2007): 452.
55. Fitzsimmons, “Effect,” 79.
56. It is telling that, while the NPS struggled to fund its visitor center, the concessioner’s main Mission 66 structures (Degnan’s and the Village Store) were completed by 1960. “Cultural Landscape Report,” 2–115 [reference unclear, do you mean to cite all pages between 2 and 115?]. [see endnote 51]
57. *Master Plan* (1963).
58. Carr, 12–13.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Longstreth, 337.
61. Fitzsimmons, “Effect,” 84.
62. For an illustration of this idea, see Figure 3.
63. *A Sense of Place: Design Guidelines for Yosemite National Park* (Yosemite, CA: U.S. National Park Service, 2012), 113.
64. “Mission 66 Progress Report” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1966), 6.
65. “Cultural Landscape Report,” 2–114, 2–115 [reference unclear: pp. 2 through 114 and pp. 2-115?]. [see endnote 51]
66. Fitzsimmons, “Effect,” 112.
67. *Ibid.*, 68.
68. See Figure 4.
69. Carr, 242.
70. John Jakle, Keith Sculle, and Jefferson Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 20.
71. *Ibid.*, 45.
72. *Ibid.*, 54.
73. Now known as The Yosemite Lodge at the Falls.
74. Carr, 247.
75. See Figure 5.
76. *A Sense of Place*, 148.
77. Fitzsimmons, “Effect,” 99.
78. *A Sense of Place*, 146. See Figure 6 for a map of the complex.
79. The Yosemite Lodge’s parking lots were expanded in 1957, 1958, and 1960. By 1966, the complex featured 3.6 acres of visitor parking. Fitzsimmons, “Effect,” 61–64.
80. “Cultural Landscape Report,” 2-92, 2-98. Cabins on streets like Oak Lane and Fir Lane had been around since the 1920s, demonstrating that distinct residential neighborhoods were not an entirely new phenomenon. [reference unclear, do you mean to cite all pages between 2 and 92, 98? If this references to volume 2, please use vol.]. [see endnote 51]
81. In 1957, Yosemite received 9 percent more trailer campers than the past year. A family of four could rent a camper for roughly thirty–five dollars a week, “considerably less than . . . utilizing concession operated

- facilities." Automobile tourists were Yosemite Lodge's target audience, though the advent of RVs/trailers also threatened to cut into concessioner profits. Memo to regional director from Yosemite superintendent, 1958. RMR Series 1, Subseries 11, Box 39.
82. Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers, 56.
  83. Letter from Yosemite Park & Curry Company president to Yosemite superintendent, 1967. RMR Series 2, Subseries 1, Box 1.
  84. Hugh Hardy, "Towards an Architecture of the Valley," *Places* 6, no. 3 (1990), 28.
  85. Carr, 248–249; Greene, 883.
  86. Carr, 248–249. The valley's camping capacity was estimated at twenty-five hundred sites; Mission 66 plans aimed to triple the existing eight hundred sites outside the valley.
  87. *Ibid.*
  88. David Louter, *Windshield Wilderness: Cars, Roads, and Nature in Washington's National Parks* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 13.
  89. See Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
  90. Specifically, between Cathedral Peak (at the western end of Tuolumne Meadows) and White Wolf. *A Sense of Place*, 39.
  91. Findlay, 38.
  92. Letter to regional director from Yosemite superintendent, 1958.
  93. Richard H. Quin, "Tioga Road: Written Historical and Descriptive Data" (Washington, DC: Historic American Engineering Record, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1991), unpaginated.
  94. Not everyone was so sanguine about the road's potential. The Sierra Club rallied against what it saw as undue spoliation of Yosemite's scenic resources; a new highway would bring only "the restless driver" and "the trailer tourist." Proponents of the road deemed this behavior "snobbish" and "punitive," denying access to all but the hardest motorists. See Carr, 257–263.
  95. This particular passage describes the growth of San Jose, California, but it is widely applicable to other western cities in the postwar era. Findlay, 33.
  96. Greene, 755.
  97. Letter to regional director from Yosemite superintendent, 1958. .
  98. *Ibid.*
  99. Fitzsimmons, "Effect," 72–73.
  100. Greene, 882.
  101. *Ibid.*
  102. Don Reed, "El Portal to Ease Crowded Yosemite," *Oakland Tribune* January 11, 1961.
  103. Greene, 754.
  104. *Ibid.*, 994.
  105. *Ibid.*
  106. Construction was slated to be a mixture of federal and concessioner financing—another parallel to Yosemite Village. Reed.
  107. *Ibid.* The irony of ostensible environmentalists living in artificially cooled housing is striking. See Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 45–86 for a discussion of air conditioning and its implications for postwar American housing.
  108. Fitzsimmons, *Central*, 108.
  109. *Ibid.*
  110. In the late 1960s, the NPS instituted "unitization" of valley campgrounds—creating discrete numbers campsites, rather than vaguely defined boundaries that could accommodate twice the intended amount of visitors. Rangers were dispatched to control registration procedures, as well. Once capacity in the valley was reached, they would direct visitors to outlying campgrounds like Tuolumne Meadows and Wawona. "Yosemite Park Announces Improvements In Park Use," *Redlands Daily Facts*, May 22, 1968.
  111. Fitzsimmons, *Central*, 109. An influx of disruptive "hippies" to the valley may have contributed to this trend, as well. See McClellan, 79–87.