

Painted Desert Community Complex: A Case Study of Mission-66 Preservation

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ABSTRACT

The Painted Desert Community Complex is a Richard Neutra-designed project located at Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona. This project was completed during the first half of the 1960s as a part of the National Park Service's Mission-66 program, in which the Service aimed to modernize and better accommodate the increasing visitor numbers primarily through new construction and programmatic changes. As a result, the National Park Service now has the responsibility of managing a massive inventory of Modernist buildings that contribute greatly to the country's cultural heritage yet continue to be undervalued by many. This paper explores the evolving story of Mission-66 preservation through the case study of Painted Desert: how has this important example of "Modernism in the desert" been managed, treated, and preserved since its completion in 1965? This research develops and contextualizes the narrative of Painted Desert's preservation through an examination of National Park Service documents, such as maintenance plans and National Register forms, articles from various preservation organizations, and information from current Petrified Forest employees, among other sources. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Modernism was falling out of favor across the country and Mission-66 buildings were left unprotected. Beginning just a few years after Painted Desert's completion, the complex was the victim of a series of alterations that greatly impacted the integrated International-Style design for which Neutra was renowned. In 1993, it was even recommended that the complex be demolished. However, at the turn of the 21st century, the cultural values of Modernism grew within the discourse of preservation professionals across the country. Petrified Forest National Park began to actively preserve the complex through restoration projects and worked for its protection by listing on the National Register. This momentum carried through to today because of increasing scarcity of Mission-66 resources, nonprofit partnerships, and greater acceptance by the National Park Service of Mission-66 as a key phase in its history. Restoration of Neutra's vision has been ongoing at the site since the early 2000s and continues today. The paper concludes with a speculation on the future of Mission-66 preservation.

These buildings have the potential to be both a culturally and environmentally responsible option for parks as park officials grapple with how to manage their cultural resources. While Mission-66 is now valued and protected more consistently by park management, it is still unknown to a majority of the public who visit the parks. The National Park Service has the opportunity to activate this great stock of resources through public history and engagement to garner greater support for these Modernist buildings. Mission-66's preservation story and presence in American cultural heritage is still evolving today and the continual consideration of these buildings as architecturally and culturally significant will be integral to their future.



Figure 1. View of the Painted Desert Community Complex from the Main Visitor Parking Lot. (Source: Modern Phoenix LLC, "Neutra's Last Standing National Park Project Is Right Here in Arizona: Modern Phoenix." Neutra's Last Standing National Park Project is Right Here in Arizona | Modern Phoenix, 2013. Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://modernphoenix.net/neutra/painteddesert.htm>.)



Figure 2. View of the Central Courtyard Facing West during the Construction of the Visitor Center. (Source: Beinlich Studios/ National Park Service, Photograph, 1960s, <https://saving-places.org/stories/painted-desert-community-complex-returns-to-modernist-roots#.YnBVB-C1h1p8>, Accessed May 3, 2022).



Figure 3. View of an Apartment Exterior, 1962. (Source: Beinlich Studios/ National Park Service, "Painted Desert Community Complex Apartment Exterior", Photograph, Painted Desert Community Complex, 1962. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/petrifiedforest-nps/33407710671/in/album-72157688391095901/>.)