

# FIRST WORD

BY JON JARVIS

## Restorative by Design

**IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE NATIONAL PARKS**, visitors arrived by rail or coach or on horseback, and—often in their formal Victorian clothes—sat in the grass by the river or walked out to the glacier or posed by the ruins. They had ideas in those days about the restorative powers of nature, not only in a physical sense, but in ways that evaded description. Perhaps they sought to glimpse the wild nature of a recently tamed continent. In later years, the idea of the national parks called to mind the mythical cross-country trip in the station wagon or the classic panoramas from postcards and coffee-table books. **SINCE ITS FOUNDING 96 YEARS AGO**, the national park system has grown infinitely more complex. It includes not just the scenic wonderlands out west, but urban parks like Golden Gate in San Francisco, Gateway in New York, and the National Mall in Washington, DC. Our mission requires us to walk the fine line between stewardship and access, to understand the myriad ways in which people interact with the landscape. In large part, we achieve that balance through design. **THERE IS A CONNECTION** between design and conservation in the national parks that goes well beyond aesthetics. Extreme care and craftsmanship have gone into shaping the places that millions enjoy every year. Most do not notice the way the landscape unfolds before them, the subtle theater involved in its presentation. **IN THE '20S AND '30S**, the National Park Service had its own cadre of landscape architects, who created masterworks in the famous roads at Shenandoah and Glacier. In later years, we have brought some of the nation's most accomplished architects and designers to work in the national parks, a tradition that includes names like Eero Saarinen and Dan Kiley and Lawrence Halprin. It is a tradition we plan to uphold, but the 21st century brings challenges. As open space disappears into suburban development and strip malls, the subtle power of design can help people understand the fragility of the natural world and our responsibility to care for it. Design, as well, has an uncanny ability to convey the enduring lessons of history. **THE NATIONAL PARKS MUST NOT ONLY** do these things, but set an example of sustainability for the entire world. Our newest visitor centers get LEED ratings that meet the toughest standards in environmental design. The Craig Thomas Center at Grand Teton National Park uses geothermal and solar energy, light sensors, and composting bathrooms that save about 76,000 gallons of water annually. It achieved a platinum LEED rating—the highest possible. At Denali National Park, the visitor center was built largely with recycled materials, uses on-site cold water for air conditioning, and features a number of other sustainable qualities. At Mount Rainier National Park, the visitor center will cost an estimated \$7 million less to operate over its lifespan than its predecessor,

its pitched roof shedding snow in a place that gets 800 inches a year. You will be seeing more of such accomplishments not only at our visitor centers, but throughout the national park system. **YET THE UTMOST IN SUSTAINABILITY** may be having to care for no visitor centers at all. For the past few years, we have been part of a collaborative effort known as Designing the Parks, an initiative that promotes sustainable design. Its latest effort—studio competitions at some of the nation's top universities—invites architecture and landscape design students to envision parks “beyond the visitor center,” re-examining the very concept. **THE VISITOR CENTER HAS ALWAYS SERVED** as the gateway to the park, the repository of information. Today, many people—and not just those under 30—plan their visits online, downloading information to iPhones, iPads, and Droids. And while there is no question that people should be able to talk to a ranger, is the visitor center the best place to do it? **IT IS A QUESTION THAT THE REALITIES** of the 21st century demand we ask. And it prompts the deeper question of who uses the parks and why. I have heard young people say that when they go to a national

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park they want to leave all technology behind. I have heard others say they want the full suite of wireless wonders. **THE PARKS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN** places of discovery, as true in an urban environment as it is at Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon. Whatever course we take, it must lead us to the same destination: that of those early pilgrims to natural America. The parks should remain what they have always been: places that beckon us into the wilderness, and into the past. **THE QUALITIES WE SEEK IN PARK DESIGN** can be elusive, but we know what they are: sustainability, reverence for place, engagement of all people, expansion beyond traditional boundaries. While these qualities call for excellence in park design, they also resonate with the National Park Service stewardship ethos, and with conservation writ large as we practice it on a nationwide scale. **THE NATIONAL PARKS ARE EXPRESSIONS** of who we are as a society and what we deem important. They are meditations on the past and a message to the future. They occupy a unique juncture among culture, science, health, and civics. Design, at its heart, is an act of preservation that will help carry the national parks into their second century.

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