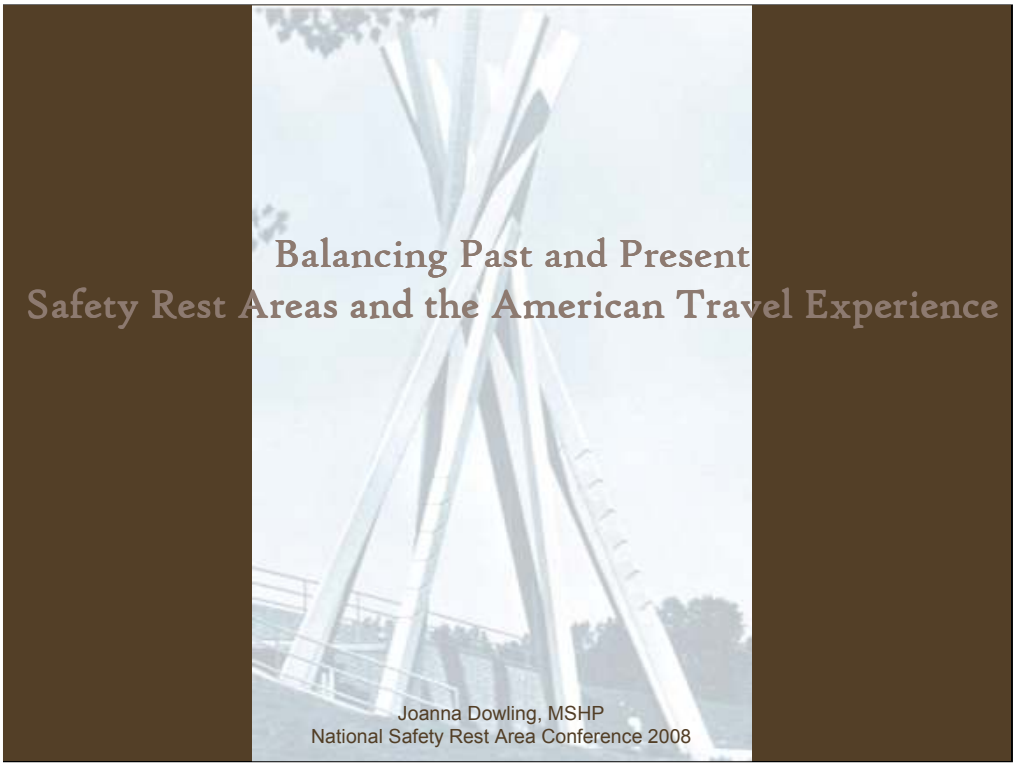



I have been researching rest area history and architecture for the past three years now, and one of the things that I have learned in that time, is that if you are going to study bathroom history you have to have a sense of humor about it, so I am going to attempt to make this discussion as lively as possible.

My primary focus has been looking at the developmental history of the rest area program, beginning with the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 through the 1970s. And also looking at the architectural forms that were built in these sites; this is based on a background in historic preservation and architectural history.

I presented at two conferences in Albuquerque last month, The Society for Commercial Archeology and Preserving the Historic Road, and people were very interested in this topic, which I hope will be encouraging to all of you.

Today, I want to talk about the more functional aspect of this story. In keeping with the theme of the conference "More with Less," the premise of my talk is "balancing past and present." because I think that there are many mutually beneficial solutions to be found in the combined awareness of history and function.

Designed to be both functional and aesthetically pleasing, the rest areas at most locations will include lighted rest-room facilities, a few picnic tables and benches, parking, on-and-off ramps, a water fountain, litter barrels, a telephone booth and a travel information shelf.

Design for Modern Roadside Rest Areas, Better Roads Magazine 1965

*Images: Safety Rest Area Development*

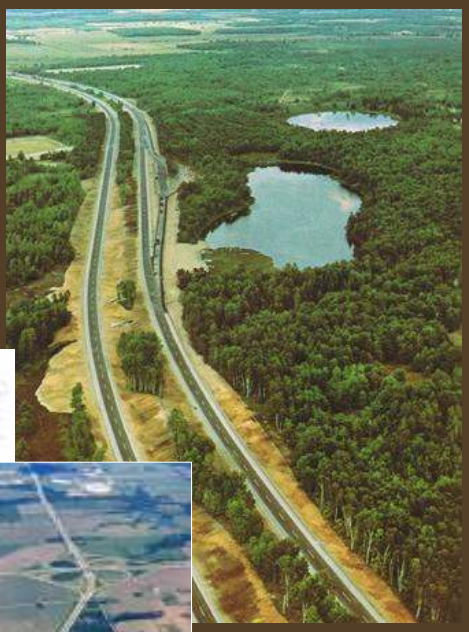
I am going to touch briefly on the developmental history of the program, just as a little refresher, as I am sure that many of you are familiar with it. And give you an introduction to architectural forms as I have identified them.

But I would like to spend a lot of my time discussing how safety rest areas are becoming significant historical artifacts of the mid-century period and how an awareness of this history can

one: help preserve some rest area elements and hence a historical appreciation of them; and

two: how this idea of historic preservation can provide a platform for conservation minded approaches to maintenance and updating as a means of combating some of the challenges of budgeting and manpower.

Improvement of the Interstate System to meet approved design standards will result in a system of controlled access highways. In rural areas highway users will be able to leave the highway only at interchanges spaced several miles apart. Use of shoulders is to be limited to emergency and vehicle/breakdown stops. Shoulders should not be considered as space for safety rest areas. In the interest of safety and convenience to the motoring public, safety rest areas are necessary.
~ *A Policy on Safety Rest Areas*, 1958





Map showing completed segments of Interstate Highway in 1966

*Images: Safety Rest Area Development, American Highways, Joanna Dowling*

Safety rest areas were included in the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, the legislation that funded the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways. They were to be funded on the same 90/10 percent federal/state sharing basis as the while of the system. And while the federal government was to provide major funding for the program, as you well know, individual state departments of transportation would be responsible for the design, construction and maintenance of the sites, along with the highways they served.

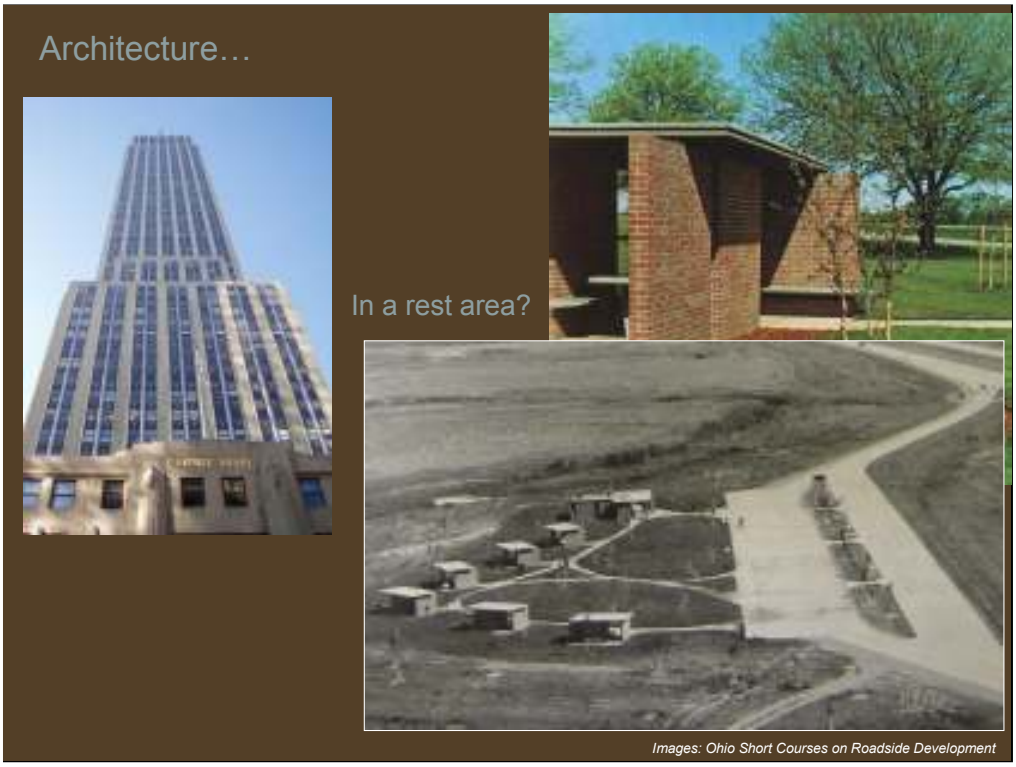
Policy guidelines dictating the design and development of rest area sites were issued by the American Association of State Highway Officials in 1958.

These guidelines were straightforward and called only for basic amenities and site configurations. They also marked the first time that national standardized guidelines would dictate the construction of highway services… In the interest of economy and timeliness, the guidelines recommended that sites be constructed concurrently with road construction, minimizing the cost and effort of installing entrance and exit ramps and parking areas. As a result, the construction of first generation safety rest areas, can in many states, be linked to the completion of highway segments.

SRAs were an integral aspect of Interstate planning and were the system's sole service amenities. Intestate highways have long been reviled as having caused the demise of American primary highways and the traditional experience of traveling them. However, with the 50th anniversary of the IHS, now having come and gone, it is important that we asses the historical relevance of the System, and its significant role in our 20th century transportation story.

The IHS certainly did confine road travelers to a specific set of experiences, however it also opened new corridors of travel that provided a new kind of access to the nation.

SRAs were a kind of bridge between traditional road travel and Interstate travel. And in a historical context represent an effort on the part of highway developers to maintain a sense of regional authenticity.




One of the primary ways that SRAs work to connect people to place is through their architectural forms.

So when I tell people about this work, the first reaction is usually a little bit of confusion.

First, what exactly is a rest area?

And then, so what is it that you study about them, Architecture…in a rest area? It just doesn't seem to make sense to people right away.

However, once the initial explanation is made, and the idea seems to connect…I am usually met with stories and or recollections about a persons experience stopping in a rest area, something that happened or that they remember seeing as children, parents talk about how much they love them when they are traveling with their children, and usually there is a comment identifying the states in which they have experienced what they would consider the best and worst rest areas.

There is a kind of nostalgic recollection that comes from people, and it is this kind of response that really speaks about the human aspect of these sites, they were after all constructed to serve our very most basic of human concerns, and I think that people connect with this kind of intimate interaction with a place, especially in the context of Interstate road travel that can be isolating and monotonous.

The romanticism of the roadside teepee was captured by rest area designers in South Dakota, Oklahoma and Texas. The picnic shelter shown at right is located in a picnic area on I-10 westbound in western Texas. Constructed in the late 1960s it recalls the roadside regionalism exemplified by the Wigwam Motel on route 66 in Holbrook, Arizona

*Images: Safety Rest Area Development, Roadside Americana*

The standardization of limited access, meant that the experience of the motorist would be dictated by the path of the roadway in an unprecedented manner. The road would not only determine the path one would travel but also the places one could stop, and thus the nature of the places and things that travelers would encounter and experience.

Safety rest areas served a dual function: they were designed to provided basic services for motorists confined to long stretches of Interstate roadway;

and they were quickly recognized as a way of creating a sense of place, an identifier of state and/or region, for travelers who may not otherwise have contact with local landscapes outside of the Interstate System.

The generation of Americans who had come of age during the inter-war years had responded to the visual language established by roadside business of that period. Exaggerated and fantastical building forms along with quaint cottages and colonial facades defined the experience of the American roadside in the pre-Interstate era.

*In view of the huge sums of money spent on development of new super highways, should sanitary facilities be restricted to privy type toilets and hand pump water supply? Should not the rustic design be replaced by the modern in keeping with the highways being served?*
~ George T. O'Malley, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, 1957

This toilet building, located on I-64 eastbound in Kentucky, is exemplary for its modern design. Constructed in 1968, it is the only rest area element recognized as significant for its architecture within the Final List of Nationally and Exceptionally Significant Features of the Federal Interstate Highway System.

*Images: Joanna Dowling*

The modern aesthetic that emerged dominate in the post war era informed Interstate construction. Safety rest areas would become a marriage of formal ideology and visual sentimentality, responding to the idealism of past and present. The architectural design of safety rest areas would be the manifestation of this marriage; taking on the characteristics that had defined regional and exaggerated elements of roadside commercialism while forming a new modern vocabulary.

I would like to give you a basic description of the architectural forms constructed in first generation rest area sites, I have defined first generation as 1958 through the late 1970s.

I have identified seven stylistic categories, within which buildings and structures of this first generation era of significance can be categorized.

**Basic Traditional**

· Late 1950s – mid 60s
· Modest in scale
· Wood or stone construction
· Rectangular forms with a hipped or gable roof
· Not regionally specific

First generation toilet building design in Wisconsin, constructed 1960

First generation toilet building design in Missouri, constructed 1965

**Modern**

· Early through late 1960s
· Roof lines are a distinguishing feature
· Low rising horizontally oriented
· Brick, concrete block, cast or poured concrete
· Common in the Midwest

*Images: Joanna Dowling*

These designations are generally chronological beginning with the earliest building types.

Now I have heard conflicting reports on who was actually first, so I am of course open to input, but from the best of what I have found in print…Ohio can probably be credited with the completion, in 1959, of the first safety rest area sites that followed the AASHO policy guidelines. The buildings included in these sites were a model of the traditional type and reminiscent of the Wisconsin building pictured here, which was completed the following year. Traditional type buildings were modest and functional and closely express the link between roadside parks and safety rest areas.

Buildings of the modern type range widely in form and materials. In general these buildings did not express an identifiable influence of the cultural or natural history of their state and/or region, but closely reflected the modern architectural aesthetic of the 1950s and 60s, mimicking high-style design trends.

Both of the buildings shown here were prototype toilet building designs for their respective states, and each of them are among the last remaining from their states initial era of development.

Both buildings have been retained and are currently used as maintenance facilities in updated and expanded rest area sites.

**Regional**

- Mid 1960s through present
- Designs reflect culturally historic elements of a local region or state
- Construction materials may reflect regionally traditional building materials
- Common in the Midwest, Southwest, some Southeastern states

Regional design in the Mohawk rest area on I-8 in Arizona, c. 1972

**Rustic or Regional Modern**

- 1960s
- Simple modern forms with rustic detailing
- Designed to blend with local landscapes
- Common in the western states, with some examples in the Southwest

California has multiple design schemes that reflect both a modern sensibility and the geography of the states diverse regions, c. 1967

*Images: Joanna Dowling*

Most rest area design schemes incorporated some kind of regional considerations, be it in site selection or landscape development. However buildings and structures designed with a regional motif capture a sense of the local through direct and graphic portrayal. This manner of regionalism became popular in the late 1960s, and was used widely in the Southwest as well as the Midwest. Teepee picnic shelters were the most prolific regional image that I have identified, having been built in different forms in South Dakota, Oklahoma and Texas, and I have reason to believe Colorado, but I am very interested if anyone can confirm this for me.

Rustic or regional modern designs did not represent regional qualities in a programmatic manner, as in a teepee or an adobe shelter, but incorporated materials and forms that complemented their natural settings, and were typically modest building forms.

**Combined Forms**
· 1970s
· Characterized by unconventional building forms that do not reflect traditional building types
· Not regionally specific

Enterprise rest area on I-90 in Minnesota, constructed 1976

Enfield rest area on I-94 in Minnesota, constructed 1978, now lost

**Free Form**
· 1970s
· Characterized by the use of natural forms and a physical relationship to the landscape
· Not regionally specific

*Images: Minnesota Department of Transportation*

The final three designations all date to the 1970s and could probably be bulked together, but I have separated them as a means of identifying distinguishing characteristics.

In general buildings in the 1970s were of increased scale. Enclosed lobby spaces became a popular building feature which created more space for and emphasis on travel information dispersal.

**1970s Funk/Revival**

- 1970s
- Roof forms are a distinguishing feature
- Larger in scale than 1960s counterparts
- building forms are straightforward in form and materials
- Not regionally specific

Welcome Center on I-65 in Tennessee, Constructed c. 1970

*Images: Joanna Dowling*

These buildings are my favorite in a love/hate kind of way. They are ugly and yet undeniable engaging. They are wonderful examples of mid-century architecture that is hard to love, but must be recognized for its place in our 20th century architectural heritage.

Funk/Revival buildings, as they are lovingly called, are most notably identified by multiple variations on the mansard revival roof form. We sometimes call it the Pizza Hut roof. Roof forms are their most distinguishing characteristic.

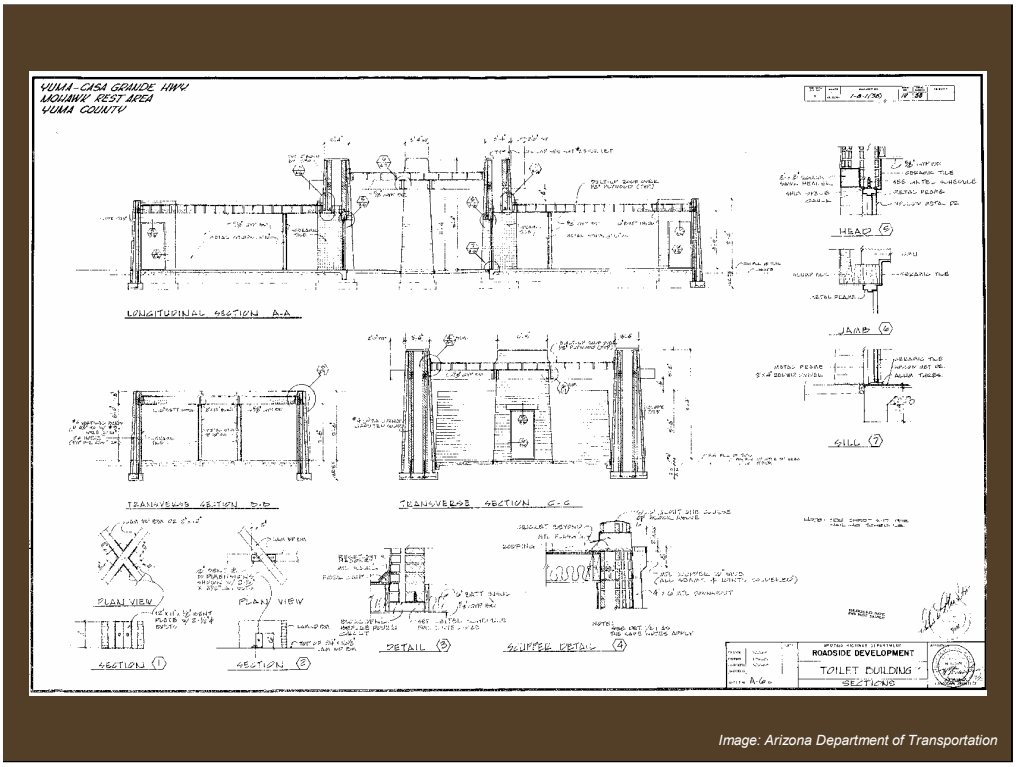



Image: Arizona Department of Transportation

After looking at the different architectural qualities of rest area buildings I would like to now look at different stages of subsequent intervention. These are interventions that I have identified through my research, but not to say that there are not other forms of modifications that have been made, or may be necessary.

The reason for discussing these changes is to present some various redevelopment schemes that can potentially be used as models for the 'more with less' approach. They are also meant to serve as touchstones for determining how interventions will impact original materials.

I have identified 6 stages of intervention and will present them beginning with the least invasive.


**Mechanical or Internal upgrades**

Have the lease impact on the external design character of a building…and we know what this entails, upgrades to mechanical systems, internal fixtures and the like

**External Modifications Impacting Original Architecture**

These interventions involve some manner of addition, reconfiguration, or as we see here in the Iowa example, enclosure to the original structure. These changes altar the character of the original building, but they do not hid or fully reconfigure the original design of a building. Rather than replacing a building all together this intervention allows for the retention of original material while accommodating for changing needs.

I think that the buildings at the Indian John rest area that we visited yesterday is a wonderful example of this kind of redevelopment. Incorporating the original building into the construction of a new complex.


**New Toilet Building or Structure Constructed within and Original Site**

This is fairly straightforward. The example I am showing here is in a rest area on I-5 in Southern Oregon, just north of Ashland. They have constructed a new toilet building that matches the design of the original, and maintains a nice cohesion in the site.

**Reuse of Original Elements in a Reconstructed Site**

This deals with broader scale site re-development, rather than just building interventions. The examples shown here are in two different sites in Missouri. As I mentioned earlier, there are only a few of Missouri's first generation buildings in existence, those that are have been converted to storage or maintenance facilities. The picture at left shows the Minneola rest area on I-70 westbound, it was the states first site opening in 1965, and in the early 80s they constructed a new site adjacent to the old one and converted the original building. At right there are many original picnic shelters in sites throughout the state that have been incorporated into redeveloped sites, in the foreground you can see the 1980s shelter and in the background, the quad-foil concrete umbrella shelter designed in the 60s.

I think this is a great solution, to think about reusing and incorporate elements rather completely reconstructing all site elements. This also provides an opportunity create a historical context within the site by developing some basic interpretation for the elements retained.


**Removal and Reconstruction of Toilet Building with Retention of Other Elements**

Another straight forward description, the example I am showing is in North Dakota, which very closely relates to the previous discussion, original material has been retained on the site. In this example there is start contrast between the design of these elements, which I will not make a value judgment about…on the one hand, there is not a feeling of a cohesive site here, and on the other, in a preservation context we often consider it important to have some differentiation between old and new elements so they are not confused, of course the level of that difference is very dependent on a given project. Just for comments sake, I think that the most interesting thing about these elements is that the new feature the toilet building is designed in a rustic manner, that suggests an older aesthetic; while the older elements, picnic shelter and information kiosk represent a progressive modernism.

The final intervention I have identified is:

**Complete Reconstruction of a Site without Retention of Original Elements**

From a historical perspective the danger here is that a sense of continuity in the overall development of the site, and essentially is history has been erased.


I am not meaning to suggest that many new and redeveloped sites are not beautifully done and appreciated by motorists. I am, from a historian's perspective, looking for ways in which a historical appreciation of these sites can become a part of their functionality and perhaps even be a tool used to promote conservation, re-use and sustainability. My objective is to encourage you to look for the assets in your existing facilities, at the possibilities of reusing existing buildings and structures, even if it is not for their original use.

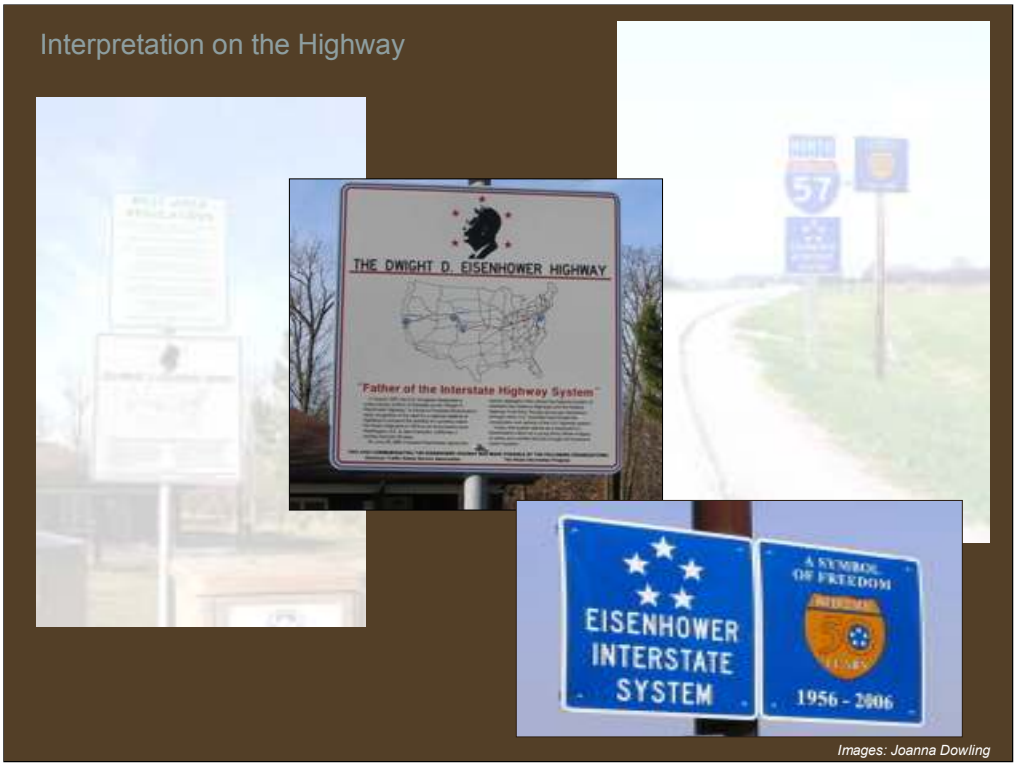
Talking into consideration the many possible scenarios of site intervention here are a few basic ideas regarding a balanced approach.


Now I don't want to over simplify this issue, because I can appreciate the many complex and frustrating issues involved in maintaining older facilities.

However, I do believe that basic upkeep and maintenance change public perception of older facilities. People want to use clean facilities that, function in an appropriate manner and they want to feel safe using them. There is a sense of neglect when stopping at a site that shows apparent signs of degradation, and a place that is perceived as neglected is also perceived as unsafe.

Maintaining and updating these buildings will increase their lifespan and prolong the need for massive redevelopment.

Texas has some wonderful examples of this, their late 60s sites are wonderfully maintained, and they are a pleasure to use.

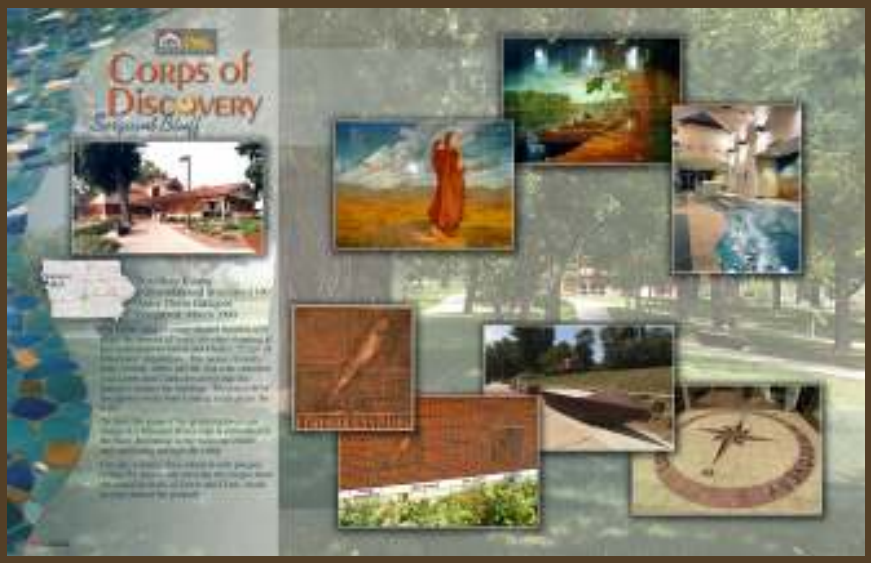



In conjunction with maintenance I think it is important to begin communicating the history of this program to motorists. The general public doesn't really know where these sites originate, why the were built in the manner they were.

There is precedent for this kind of interpretation. Rest areas have traditionally included information about the scenic, historical and geographical qualities of the regions they are located, this even pre-dates rest areas to roadside parks.

And we are now seeing some basic interpretation of the Interstate System within its right of way. I am sure many of you are familiar with the blue Interstate signs marking the 50th Anniversary of the System. The sigh shown at left gives a basic description of Eisenhower's interest in Interstate construction and some back ground on the system. It is located in Missouri rest areas.

Interpretation and Information Panels




*Images: Iowa Department of Transportation*

Iowa has created some wonderful posters for their newer rest areas which are available on their DOT website


This is a very basic, kind of underdeveloped, sample of an interpretive rest area panel that I put together.

I think these can take many forms. Here the idea is to provide basic Interstate history, describing why safety rest areas were built, a description of architectural forms, and some general information about the given state, I used New Mexico as my example…

A more in depth version of this would present, perhaps some very basic interstate background, and then focus on the features of a specific rest area, talk about when it was built and what is significant about the elements that are located there.

I think that the importance of this is in creating a context. The general public will not necessarily make this leap on their own. Information about this history is not common knowledge. So it is important to create this contextualization around these sites if they are to be appreciated as historic elements.

And again I believe that this kind of presentation stays consistent with a primary safety rest are objective….presenting educational information to the public, as a way of engaging them and prolonging their rest.

These can be very basic printed panels to be displayed in existing information panels. I am interested in pursuing possible grant funding for a project of this nature.

Image: Oregon State Archives

So in conclusion I would like to repose the question that was raised at the end of our bus tour yesterday…Where will our rest areas be in 25 years?

I think this is a poignant question in many respects…But I would like to frame it in a historical context. 25 years from now our national safety rest area program will be 75 years old. And I think that most of us will agree that this is an adequate amount of time for a resource to gain historical significance. In the preservation community we talk about 40-50 years being the most dangerous period of time on the life of a building, because it has aged to the point of needing maintenance, its function may have become obsolete, and most times it will be considered out of style.

This is a crucial time in the history of the rest area program because there are many, many sites around the country that still retain original elements. Many of them fall into this 40 to 50 year old range, and many more in the 30 to 40 range. But if we don't start assessing their significance now, they will be lost before history catches up with them.

There is really a movement right now to begin recognizing elements of our *recent past,* as it is called, and to retain buildings from the mid-century, and not all of them because the are great architecture, but because they are a record of our American story, stemming from architectural movements, that are really a deeper reflection of our cultural ideals.

Road building in the 20th century absolutely changed our national culture and the construction of the Interstate System further transformed our lifestyle and has really cemented the way that we live in and move through our country. Safety rest areas are a part of this story, they tell a very human part of the story. And I would just urge you to remember this as you move through your day to day operations and the cumbersome burdens that they carry, that you are also the stewards of this very significant piece of American history.

So as I hope has been clear throughout this presentation, I don't necessarily believe that all original rest area elements need be retained, but I do believe that it is important to retain some of them as a way of maintaining a connection to their history, and I also believe that there are ways in which applying preservation minded ideals to maintenance issues can result in mutually beneficial solutions.

*After viewing the examples presented in this brochure, it should be evident that considerable effort and imagination is required to produce a Safety Rest Area that will withstand the test of time and the increased demands of the motoring public*

*~ Safety Rest Area Development, 1971*

Joanna Dowling, Historian

www.restareahistory.org
joanna.dowling@gmail.com
312-217-1164
1030 N. State Street, 35F
Chicago, IL 60610