

Balancing Past and Present: *Safety Rest Areas and the American Travel Experience*



Within the fields of architectural history and historic preservation there is currently a movement to encourage the appreciation of architectural forms designed during the mid-twentieth century. The mid-century period is typically understood as the period of time commencing at the end of World War II and extending through the middle 1970s. Over the past decade increased recognition has been gained for high-style modern architecture, however vernacular and smaller scale examples of mid-century architecture are still struggling to achieve widespread, and in many places, even basic levels of appreciation.

Safety rest areas (SRAs) are a product of the mid-century period and embody a dual identity. They evidence the massive expansion of the country's transportation infrastructure, as seen in the development of the Interstate Highway System. They reflect the architectural aesthetic of the period, displaying formal qualities of the high-style as well as unique and whimsical elements of vernacular and roadside commercial architecture.

Safety rest area sites are a kind of cultural landscape, places where travelers from diverse parts of the nation and even the world, cross paths and experience a sense of local place, while remaining within the limited access framework of the Interstate Highway System. The experience of American travelers was radically altered by the construction of this system, safety rest areas created a bridge between travelers and the places they traveled through. The architectural forms built within these sites served to articulate these places through the use of regional representation, and defined the modernity of the sites by seeking to create in human experience what the Interstate System was creating in engineering marvel.

The developmental and architectural history of the safety rest area program is a significant and engaging aspect of our mid-century heritage. It is particularly important when viewed through the contextual perspective of the Interstate Highway System. It is not, however, a static system, it is one that has been continually grown and developed since its inception. This system must still serve the demands of America's traveling public, a public that has grown in size and expectation over the past half-century. To meet the demands of a twenty-first century America, the safety rest area program is called upon to provide service facilities that meet the expectations of contemporary travelers. However, through radical redevelopment a sense of historical continuity is inevitably lost; a sensibility that grows ever more important as the SRA system ages and takes on increasing historical significance. In an attempt to balance historical significance with current demands and budget shortfalls it seems appropriate to turn to conservation minded approaches rooted in an appreciation of the systems historical context and continued functional merits. Solutions such as an increased commitment to the maintenance of older facilities and the display of basic interpretive panels, are examples of actions that will aid a perceptual shift on the part of both administrators and users.

The first section of this brochure outlines architectural types as found in toilet buildings and picnic shelters constructed within safety rest areas between the late 1950s and late 70s. Architectural types have been divided into seven stylistic categories, (these designations are generally chronological beginning with the earliest):

- ~Basic Traditional
- ~Modern
- ~Rustic or Regional Modern
- ~Regional
- ~Combined Forms
- ~Free Form
- ~1970s Funk/Revival

The second section looks at different levels of intervention and redevelopment and seeks to identify the manner in which each action impacts the integrity of an SRA site. There are potential benefits and detriments of each and both angles will be explored.

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Basic Traditional



These buildings most closely express the architectural link between America's early roadside parks and the safety rest areas that took their place within the Interstate System. Constructed in the late 1950s and early to mid 60s, traditional buildings types are basic in form and materials, not representing regional aesthetics or architectural design trends. Few of these buildings exist today, as these early sites were commonly updated to serve increasing demands. Notably, Wisconsin retains a few of its first generation toilet buildings, designed in 1960; including the building pictured here which is now used as a storage facility in the redeveloped Lyndon Station rest area on I-90/94 in Juneau County. The shelter pictured here originates in Ohio.

Modern



Missouri's first generation toilet building and picnic shelter designs are a paradigm of simple modernist design as seen in safety rest areas of the mid-1960s. However, buildings of this type do exhibit a range of form and materials. Durable materials including, brick, concrete block, decorative concrete block and cast concrete were used to create modest low rising, typically horizontally oriented buildings. Roof forms are often the most distinguishing characteristic; flat, butterfly, scalloped and saw-tooth configurations were used. As a rule modern type buildings do not express an identifiable influence of the cultural or natural history of their state and/or region, but closely reflect the modern architectural aesthetic of the mid-century period, mimicking high-style design trends.

Rustic or Regional Modern



Buildings of the rustic or regional modern type exhibit design qualities of basic modern forms, but also display a conscious effort to match the buildings with surrounding landscapes and natural environments. These building forms are common in mountainous and desert regions where contrasting architectural elements would be particularly evident. These buildings are typically modest in scale with a horizontal orientation that connects them to the landscape. They were constructed in the early and mid-1960s.

Regional



The use of regionally defining characteristics in SRA design produced many of the most unique and engaging buildings and structures. Popularized in the late 1960s regional design was used widely in the Midwest and Southwest. Buildings and structures designed in this manner capture a sense of the local through direct and graphic portrayal. Regional design schemes were based on such factors as the cultural history of an area or its indigenous and/or traditional architectural forms and materials. Teepees were the most commonly used regional image, they can still be found in Texas, Oklahoma and South Dakota. New Mexico and Arizona developed sites that reflected the traditional aesthetics of the region's native history.

Combined Forms



Combined forms buildings are characterized by shapes and forms that defy the traditional ideas of building practices. They were built almost exclusively during the 1970s and began to take on a grader scale than those SRA buildings constructed in the previous decade. These buildings are dramatic and engaging, they often relate to the natural landscape in their reference to natural materials and orientations.

Free Form



Free form type buildings were also constructed during the 1970s and are equally unconventional in form. In many examples they do not resemble buildings, but are more like natural forms emerging from the landscape. These buildings employ the imagination and serve as a kind of visual amusement.

1970s Funk/Revival



Also constructed during the 1970s, funk/revival buildings and structures are most uniquely distinguished by their distinctive roof forms, which vaguely reference historical forms; most commonly multiple variations of the mansard revival. They reflect the broader revivalism of the 1970s.

The following discussion will identify six primary levels of intervention that impact SRA constructions. Architecturally speaking intervention impacts toilet buildings most profoundly; as they are the feature that provide the most essential service to users, and require the most frequent updating of amenities and mechanical systems. Reconstructing toilet buildings to meet contemporary expectations is a costly undertaking and can prove cost prohibitive. In these circumstances preservation minded principles can be employed that will recognize significant histories while establishing new solutions to upgrading facilities; reducing the need to construct elaborate new toilet buildings. The examples shown on the following pages are for these purposes analyzed in a preservation context. These projects were not specifically undertaken with preservation or anti-preservation goals in mind. For the purposes of this discussion we will look specifically at modifications to toilet buildings, but also at general site modifications and discuss creative ways to maintain historic character while integrating necessary new facilities for the traveling public.

The six levels of intervention, listed generally beginning with the least invasive, have been identified as:

- ~Mechanical or internal upgrades
- ~External modifications impacting the original architecture of buildings or structures
- ~New toilet building or structure added to original site
- ~Reuse of original elements in a reconstructed site
- ~Removal and reconstruction of toilet building with retention of other elements
- ~Complete reconstruction of site without retention of original elements

Mechanical or Internal Upgrades

Internal interventions are the least destructive kind of modifications made to toilet buildings. Internal interventions include the changing or upgrading of mechanical systems and the upgrading of other internal fixtures such as toilets, sinks, lighting and the like. These upgrades generally do not affect the architectural quality of the building, but are meant to enhance its serviceability.

External Modifications Impacting Original Architecture



These modifications consist of an addition or enclosure to an original structure, such changes alter the character of an original building, but do not hide or fully reconfigure the original design of a building. A clear example of such intervention is found in the state of Iowa. The prototype Iowa toilet building, designed in the mid-1960s, was a rectangular, gable front structure with a porch like overhand extending the full width of the front elevation. In the 1980s the Iowa Department of Transportation enclosed the porch area to create a sealed internal lobby, creating a climate controlled space. This intervention did alter the original character of the building design; however it does not negate the building's history. Rather than replacing the building all together this intervention allowed for the retention of original material while accommodating for changing needs.

New Toilet Building or Structure Constructed within an Original Site



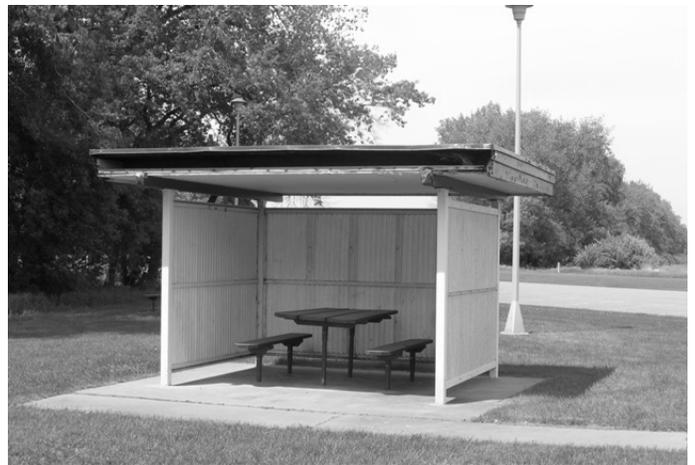
The state of Oregon constructed its first SRA pairs in the early 1960s. Their modest concrete block buildings are exemplary of the regional modern style, blending easily with their natural surroundings. Since its first generation sites were constructed the Oregon DOT has added auxiliary buildings to many of its sites. The example pictured here, on I-5 just north of Ashland, pairs a new larger building with an original counterpart. The new building (pictured right) increases the user capacity of the original site and closely reflects the design aesthetic of the original building (pictured left). Throughout the state auxiliary buildings are effective in their respect of original design, while remaining distinctive. In some sites original buildings are now used to function as overflow facilities when use volumes are at their peak, and can be used as alternates when maintenances is being conducted.

Reuse of Original Elements in a Reconstructed Site



This manner of alteration does not deal specifically with intervention into a building envelope, but rather with the spatial reconfiguration of a rest area site. In both examples pictured here, (Missouri at left and Wisconsin at right), site redevelopment has also provided for a change in the toilet buildings original use. Both of these buildings are now used as maintenance facilities in expanded sites. In Missouri, the Minneola SRA was expanded to the east of the original site in the 1980s. The configuration of the original site plan can still be deciphered, and sits adjacent to the subsequent development. In the Lyndon Station rest area in Wisconsin, the original toilet building was also retained as a maintenance facility; in contrast to the Missouri example this rest area was completely redeveloped. The original building is now situated near the egress of the new site. In many states original picnic shelters have been retained in updated and redeveloped sites. Such case studies provide a lesson in building use and historical interpretation. Retaining certain elements of an original site provides a connection to the sites history. This conservation minded approach also reduces the need to construct new facilities, where older ones can be used.

Removal and Reconstruction of Toilet Building with Retention of other Elements



This manner of intervention involves the complete removal and replacement of the original toilet building. Sometimes additional picnic shelters are also added to the site, or in the case of the North Dakota sample pictured here, the original building was replaced by a new building with all other elements left in place. In either case it is common for the new elements to stand in stark contrast to the architectural character of the original elements.

Complete Reconstruction of Site without Retention of Original Elements

When a rest area site is completely redeveloped, all tangible evidence of its original integrity is lost. From a historians perspective this loss creates an unfortunate gap in understanding the continuity of the programs historical development. However, from a pragmatic stance, one must acknowledge that such action is, at times, necessary. Traditionally rest area facilities were built with knowledge that they would eventually become outdated and require replacement. Many sites were in essence built to be rebuilt. Over time funding constraints have limited the regularity with which rest area facilities could be updated in many states. As a result most states retain some if not many of their original rest area facilities constructed during the mid-century period. While this is a preservationist's delight on one hand, it has contributed to an inventory of aging facilities in need of maintenance simultaneously; a DOT's nightmare.

The stages of intervention discussed above were outlined to draw attention to various redevelopment schemes that can be used as models for future practice and as touch stones for determining how interventions will impact original materials. These examples model different preservation goals and serve as touchstones for conservation minded approaches.

In an era of aging infrastructure and budget shortfalls, it seems that conservation minded approaches are the clearest way to balance serviceability against funding resources within a historically significant context. Such an approach will lead to mutually beneficial solutions.