

ASPEN'S 20TH CENTURY ARCHITECTURE: RUSTIC STYLE BUILDINGS

The Rustic Style of architecture was symbolic of early 20th century attitudes that embraced not only the mythology of the “hardy outdoor life of American pioneers”¹ in the western United States, but also, to an extent, the larger dream of Manifest Destiny. There was embedded within the style a desire to live up to the spirit of adventure and rugged determinism of those who had ventured West.

Though heavily steeped in western legend, the Rustic Style’s roots actually lay in the simple pioneer cabin, and in the vacation homes of the Adirondack Mountains which were built in the late 1800’s. As early as 1916, however, with the founding of the National Park Service, the style became a cornerstone of the NPS’s belief that “buildings should blend in with their natural surroundings”² and that “natural settings could influence architecture.”³ The majority of entryways, information centers, and guest lodges that were built in the Parks throughout the country in the first decades of the 20th century were log and stone buildings constructed in what came to be known as the “National Parks Service Rustic” style. “The high point in the development of this ‘rustic’ design ethic occurred in the late twenties and spread throughout the nation during the work-relief programs of the Depression.”⁴



Grand Lake Lodge, built in 1925



Sumers Lodge, a vacation home in Glenwood Springs, built in 1935

Hand-in-hand with the growth of the National Parks Service was the development of resort areas throughout the Rocky Mountain States, and Rustic Style buildings, which ranged in size from small cabins to substantial lodges, were constructed in Colorado starting in 1905.⁵ Early examples of the buildings can be found in burgeoning tourism and vacation spots such as Grand Lake, Thomasville, Woodland and Estes Parks. Rustic style “represented an early 20th century movement in American architecture . . . It was picturesque, romantic architecture that recalled the American past.”⁶

In Aspen, Colorado, Rustic Style cabins used as lodges and residences, began to be built in the 1930’s, though the tourism industry was still in its infancy. The Waterman Cabins, built in 1937, and once located at the corner of 7th and Hallam Streets, have since been demolished, but were one of Aspen’s first group of small tourist cottages. The Swiss Chalets (now L’Auberge, and suffering from

¹ Carley, Rachel, “Cabin Fever: Rustic Style Comes Home”

² Rocky Mountain National Park, Home Page, Historic Buildings

³ Kaiser, Harvey H., *Landmarks in the Landscape*, 17

⁴ Harrison, Laura Soulliere, *Architecture in the Parks*, National Historic Landmark Theme Study, 1

⁵ Colorado Historical Society Home Page

⁶ Throop, E. Gail, “Rustic Architecture: Period Design in the Columbia River Gorge”

the “chalet” misnomer— as they are, indeed, in the rustic style) are located at 435 W. Main Street, and were built during roughly the same period. Prescient, and perhaps with a nod to the automobile’s growing influence in American society, a motor court configuration at the Chalets allowed guests to drive right up to the individual units. Single family residences in Aspen employed the Rustic Style as well.



300 W. Main Street, residence built in 1944.



Swiss Chalets, 435 W. Main Street, built circa 1930's



WPA Bell tower, built in the 1930's and shown here after its relocation to Paepcke Park in 1954. It was reconstructed in 1990.

Also in the 1930's, a WPA sponsored structure that was used as a bell tower was constructed at the present location of the town fire station on East Hopkins Avenue. It fell under the supervision of the National Park Service, who managed the WPA program and the design of all its projects. The Park Service's architectural philosophy was summarized at the time in a volume entitled “Park and Recreation Structures,” which stated that,

“Successfully handled, (rustic) is a style which, through the use of native materials in proper scale, and through the avoidance of rigid, straight lines, and oversophistication, gives the feeling of having been executed by pioneer craftsmen with limited hand tools. It thus achieves sympathy with natural surroundings and with the past.”⁷

After the Second World War, looking to the past— and in particular, the American past— was the result of a nation turning inwards, and away from foreign battlefields. The romance and heightened idealization of the West, and the appeal of the rugged individualist’s lifestyle, was evidenced by the popularity of television shows like “The Lone Ranger” and “Davy Crockett”, and further, by the proliferation of Western movies (many of which were produced as a result of the McCarthy Era effect on post-war Hollywood productions). The American public acculturized the West’s ideals, and the Rustic Style even found its way into children’s toys like “Lincoln Logs.”

⁷ Harrison, 8

The American landscape was transformed in the 1940's. The unparalleled growth and prosperity of the United States (spurred on in part by the GI Bill), and the "baby boom" that began— and didn't slow down— until the late 1960's, brought with it success, comfort, and a blossoming middle class. Americans were enjoying greater financial freedom, along with increased leisure time, and they were looking for adventure. They looked West.

Falling gasoline prices, the construction of cross-country highway systems, and a young, flourishing automotive industry (by-products of the post-war economic climate), "gave greater numbers of people the means to travel, and previously inaccessible places were more easily reached."⁸ Vacationing and tourism became the hallmark of the American lifestyle, and the West held a particular interest for a people with newfound freedom, and the desire for adventure. "To Americans the West is their refuge, the home of the 'last best place.'"⁹ Vacation homes, hunting lodges, dude ranches, and tourist-related facilities began to increase in number after the War, many built in the Rustic Style, which was perfect for the "frontier spirit"¹⁰ of the new American tourist.

Aspen was the ideal destination for the "new American tourist." Purple mountains majesty aside, it had a growing reputation as a ski town— a sport that was gaining increasing popularity. And as people ventured out west to vacation in the late 1940's and early 1950's, they were looking for what so many had sought before them: the spirit of adventure, romance, and ruggedness. Yet what Aspen offered, even then, was so much more. It became an "archetype for the beginning of tourism in the post-World War II American West."¹¹ The effort to create a cultural and artistic haven, and year-round resort town that offered "good opportunities for combining work, play, and culture,"¹² only added to the town's uniqueness, as a "post-war consumer culture and the nation-wide growth of tourism, combined with the beginning of the ski industry, meant that people no longer had to belong to an elite club or live in a mountain town in order to ski."¹³

Rustic Style buildings continued to be constructed in town during this period, including Deep Powder Lodge (circa late 1940's/early 1950's), at 410 S. Aspen Street, and The Hickory House (initially christened The Silver Chicken) at 735 W. Main Street, which was built in 1950. At the time, it was one of the few restaurants operating in town, and the original sign, located on the west side of the building, reads "restaurant," and is lettered to look like logs, harmonizing the theme of the structure down to the last rustic detail.



Deep Powder Lodge, 410 S. Aspen Street, built circa late 1940's/early 1950's

⁸ Rothman, Hal K., Devil's Bargains – Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West, 202

⁹ Rothman, 14

¹⁰ Carley

¹¹ Rothman, 207

¹² Rothman, 213

¹³ Gilbert, Anne M., Re-Creation through Recreation: Aspen Skiing from 1870 to 1970, 46

There was no shortage of young male labor during the period these buildings were constructed, and the materials were readily available locally. Small cabins could be erected during a summer, readying them for the new American tourist seeking the “Western adventure.”

Between 1940 and 1959, the number of full-time residents in Aspen increased by 1000, and “by 1959 at least 200 part-time residents joined the year-round crowd.”¹⁴ As Aspen’s amenities began to attract a larger, more influential and wealthy group of second homeowners (including some of Hollywood’s brightest stars), the city began to transform itself into a premiere, year round resort, and many people “chose to move to or build vacation homes in Aspen.”¹⁵ For some, a second home built in the Rustic Style was a natural choice, and things were moving fast:

“A gala opening of the lifts and reopening of the Jerome was held in January, 1947, and people poured in from all over the country. A boom was on, and every tax title was gone at the court house. If you wanted a lot or a house in Aspen, you could no longer step around to the county commissioners and make an offer of a hundred dollars or so on some abandoned property. You went to a swank new real estate office and paid through the teeth, several thousand dollars. Aspen had been bought up in a twinkling, and by a strange assortment of people- artists, writers, and movie actors who wanted to get away from city life, wealthy sportsmen who wanted a fishing and hunting lodge, mid-westerners who wanted a summer mountain cottage, eastern couples who wanted to try their hand at ranching, and ski cranks who wanted to start a business, any sort of business, to be close to Aspen’s slopes.”¹⁶

In part, as demand and mechanization quickly began to replace the handmade in many aspects of American life, log cabin kits that could be ordered by catalog, delivered by train or truck, and then assembled on site gained in popularity. The kits were another version of mail order houses that were popular during the depression era, largely due to their affordability. Following the lead of Sears, Roebuck, & Co. and Montgomery Ward (who sold hundreds of thousands of homes during the Depression), other companies began selling different styles of kit houses, including Pan Abode (established in 1952), a manufacturer that specialized in log cabins. After 1950, Rustic Style buildings in Aspen were more commonly machine-made kit log structures than hand-built, but they still reflected the same American West iconography. Materials in these later buildings simulated log construction and referenced the particular visual details of the original log structures. Examples of kit log structures built as second homes during this period are found at 211 W. Hopkins and 765 Meadows. The kits were also used for quick-to-build housing to fill the growing needs of the ski resort workforce, many of whom could not



211 West Hopkins Street, a Pan abode built in 1956

¹⁴ Rothman, 223

¹⁵ Gilbert, 72

¹⁶ Bancroft, Carolyn, Famous Aspen

qualify for traditional mortgages, due to the part time nature of their jobs, and therefore relied on affordable construction methods.

Eligibility Considerations

There are specific physical features that a property must possess in order for it to reflect the significance of the historic context. Typical characteristics of the Rustic Style are “log construction, stone foundation, small paned windows, overhanging roof, stone chimney, and battered walls.”¹⁷ To be eligible for historic designation, Aspen’s examples of Rustic Style architecture should have the following distinctive characteristics:

- Hand built structures that are constructed out of locally available materials, usually log; stone may be incorporated at the base, or in the form of a fireplace and chimney. Later examples include machine cut logs.
- The buildings are usually single story, with a low-pitched gable roof.
- True log construction with overlapping log ends, coped and stacked. Logs may be dressed and flattened for stacking or may be in rough form. Chinking infills the irregularities between the logs either way. Machine made buildings mimic these details, though without the chinking.
- Window openings are spare and usually horizontally proportioned, wood trim is used to finish out the window openings.
- Building plans are simple rectangular forms, with smaller additive elements.
- The roof springs from the log wall, and gable ends are often infilled with standard framing. This may be a small triangle or a second level of living space.
- The emphasis is on hand-made materials and the details stem from the use of the materials, otherwise the detail and decoration is minimal.

Though Pan Abode structures are still being manufactured today, which poses a greater challenge in determining the end date for the Rustic Style period, changes in the type of accommodations and facilities that were desired for both tourists and homeowners began to evidence themselves in Aspen in the early 1970’s. As land became more valuable, the era of the small vacation cabin came to an end, and custom-built homes were far more common, as were condominiums.

Aspen’s 1973 Growth Management plan, a reaction to the magnitude of change and development that the town was experiencing, recognized the need to preserve the quality of life that many felt Aspen was losing due to its popularity. Second homes began displacing permanent residents, and in fact, the City passed a controversial ordinance in order to stem the loss of resident-occupied housing. Concurrently, modest lodges were being replaced with higher-end accommodations.

These trends were noted again in 1986, when, according to the 1993 Aspen Area Community Plan¹⁸, it was found that the number of second homes had significantly increased, and that the size of these second homes was particularly large compared to traditional residences in the city. The shifts in Aspen’s development pattern suggest that it would be

¹⁷ Colorado Historical Society Home Page, Guide to Colorado Architecture

¹⁸ Aspen Area Community Plan, 1993

appropriate to establish the end of the period of historic significance, which is a term used to define the time span during which the style gained architectural, historical, or geographical importance, for simple, small scale, Rustic Style buildings as roughly 1970. With regard to Pan Abode structures, of which there is a relatively large collection remaining in town, a finding of historic significance must go beyond the basic characteristics of the building as an example of a kit house, and demonstrate a connection between a specific structure and the local story of vacation home construction and ski industry related housing, lodging, or facilities.



Deep Powder Lodge



The Castle Creek Cabins/Waterman Cabins, once located at 7th and Hallam Streets



Sunset Cabins, once located near 7th and Main Streets

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