

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

DIVISION OF PARKS AND OUTDOOR RECREATION OFFICE OF HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

MMK-161
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File No.: 3130-1R NPS
3330-6 Site of Eielson Visitor Center ✓
3330-6N Eielson Visitor Center

October 28, 2002

Paul Anderson, Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
Post Office Box 9
Denali Park, Alaska 99755

Subject: Eielson Visitor Center

Dear Mr. Anderson:

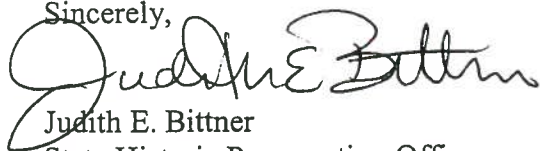
The Alaska State Historic Preservation Office reviewed National Park Service correspondence and attachment – Determination of Eligibility Eielson Visitor Center, Denali National Park and Preserve, received September 25, 2002.

The Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer concurs with National Park Service finding Eielson Visitor Center not eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

The Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer also concurs with National Park Service finding the site of Eielson Visitor Center eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The Eielson Visitor Center site (ca. 1933) is significant under Criteria A of the National Register of Historic Places for its long history of providing enhanced visitor experience and visitor services.

Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,



Judith E. Bittner
State Historic Preservation Officer

JEB:jjm



IN REPLY REFER TO:

3.30-12 NPS
3330-6N EIELSON VISITOR CENTER
3330-6 E SITE OF EIELSON VISITOR CENTER
United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Denali National Park and Preserve
Post Office Box 9
Denali Park, Alaska 99755

RECEIVED

SEP 25 2002

OHA

H4217 (DENA-SCR)

September 18, 2002

Ms. Judith Bittner
State Historic Preservation Officer
Department of Natural Resources
Office of History and Archaeology
550 W. 7th Avenue, Suite 1310
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-3565

Dear Ms. Bittner:

Attached you will find the rewritten Determination of Eligibility (DOE) for Eielson Visitor Center. As discussed by your staff and mine, the rewritten DOE addresses the site itself having significance, not the building. In keeping with the historic use of the Eielson site, the replacement of Eielson Visitor Center with a new building will help the park to better serve our visitors needs and experience.

Before the building is removed the park will insure that proper documentation is completed. The original drawings of the Eielson Visitor Center and all photo documentation will be housed in the Denali Park Archive, to serve as a permanent record of the building. In addition, our Cultural Resource staff continues research on the historic Savage River Tourist Camp and its subsequent removal to Eielson. This significant story will become a permanent part of the park education program.

If you have any question, please feel free to contact Ann Kain, Cultural Resource Manager, at (907) 644-3227 or at Ann_Kain@NPS.GOV

Sincerely,

Paul R. Anderson
Superintendent

Enclosure

Determination of Eligibility

Eielson Visitor Center, Denali National Park and Preserve

- Original Design: 1956
- Designer: National Park Service (NPS), Western Office of Design and Construction (W.O.D.C.)
- Date of Construction: 1958-1960
- Alteration: 1974-1976¹

Statement of Significance:

Constructed between 1958-60 during the Mission 66 era and drastically altered between 1974-76, the Eielson Visitor Center does not meet National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) Criteria A or C registration requirements as defined in *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type*.² Although associated with Mission 66, the Eielson Visitor Center does not exemplify the programmatic goals of Mission 66 nor did the Mission 66 program have a lasting effect on the development of Denali National Park and Preserve. In addition, the Eielson Visitor Center lacks any notable association with other events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history as required under Criteria A. Since Eielson Visitor Center is not the work of a master architect, does it possess high artistic values, and was radically altered in 1976; it is not eligible under Criteria C. In addition, in accordance to NRHP Criteria Consideration G, Eielson lacks the higher standard of integrity required for a building less than fifty years old to be eligible for the NRHP.

While the building itself is not significant, the site is significant under Criteria A of the National Register of Historic Places for its long history of providing enhanced visitor experience and visitor services. The spectacular view of Mount McKinley and the surrounding landscape from this location has made the site a focal point for the visitor experience at the park. National Park Service Landscape Architect Thomas Vint toured the park for hotel sites deep in the park in 1929. After visiting several potential sites he selected the Eielson site because of its views of Mount McKinley and surrounding peaks, the area was big enough for major development and it would be easily accessible once the park road reached that location. Vint's overall plan was to have a hotel at McKinley Park Station, the concessioner facility at Savage River and the hotel at Eielson. These three facilities would provide a choice of short-term or long-term visits, offering both sophisticated and rustic facilities. Beginning in 1933 a tent camp established at the site offered the visitor a wilderness experience with a few of the comforts of home. The Eielson site served the visitor until WW II, when the park was shut down and used as a military recreation camp. Vint's vision of building a hotel in the vicinity never

¹ The design drawings are dated to 1974, but long-time park employee Steve Carwile has stated that the alteration was not completed until 1976.

² NPS, DOI, *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type* by Sarah Allaback, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1999).

materialized, but was a topic of discussion and planning for decades to come. During the late 1940s and 1950s tourism began to increase due to post-WW II prosperity and development, increased interest in National Parks, and Alaska Statehood. Mount McKinley began seeing a significant tourist impact with the opening of the Denali Highway in 1957. With the increase in tourism and the spectacular views at the site, Eielson would remain a destination within the park. The Eielson Visitor Center was built to accommodate visitor needs. Over the past decades visitor numbers have increased to such a point that Eielson is now inadequate to meet those visitor needs. Replacing Eielson with a new visitor center will allow the park to continue to use the site as it has for over 60 years, enhancing the visitor experience and serving visitor needs.

Registration Requirements for Mission 66 Visitor Centers³

The following requirements for registering a Mission 66 Visitor Center in the National Register of Historic Places (see italicized text) are paraphrased from the registration requirements set forth in *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type* Appendix III.

I. Eligibility requirements for 50-year old Mission 66 Visitor Centers:

1. *The Visitor Center's period of significance should fall within the years 1945-1972:* Eielson Visitor Center was designed and constructed during the Mission 66 era, 1956-1966. The preliminary designs for the building were drawn in 1956. Construction began in 1958 and the building was completed in 1960.
2. *The Visitor Center should retain most or all of the physical characteristics associated with Mission 66 Visitor Center property type.* Although identified as a visitor center, Eielson was designed as an interpretive center and rest stop, a function that continues today. Eielson provides limited interpretive displays and park information, but does not provide a full array of Mission 66 program elements such as an auditorium, public gathering facilities, or administrative facilities. Although Eielson houses the local staff, it does not house park administrative services. As a result, Eielson can not be considered a complete Mission 66 Visitor Center as defined in Sarah Allaback's book *Mission 66 Visitor Centers*.
3. *The Visitor Center should retain physical integrity to the period of significance.* Eielson Visitor Center's physical integrity was drastically impaired when the structure was expanded in 1974-76. The expansion, which included a wraparound covered galleria, a restroom addition, and an outdoor viewing pavilion, changed the building's original appearance from compact, square with a highly visible entrance to sprawling linear form and obscured the entrance.
4. *The visitor center should embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction that represents high artistic values.*

³ IBID, p. 267-268.

- *Building siting in relationship to visitor flow:* Eielson is located on the park road at a site that has long been recognized for its excellent view of Mt. McKinley and the adjacent landscape.
- *Building design emphasizes plan organization:* Eielson differs from the usual Mission 66 Visitor Center building design in the lack of efficient “visitor flow.” Unlike other Mission 66 Visitor Centers, which were designed to encourage procession through the building and out into the park, the design of Eielson does not allow this procession. The design forces the visitor to exit against the flow of incoming visitors through the same door that they entered. The 1976 addition provided an additional exit from the building on to the walkway, but the exit is located at the far end of the new restroom addition away from the sink area and does not encourage procession.
- *The Building’s program centralizes numerous park services:* Eielson provides park information, interpretive displays, and restrooms as well as the viewing areas. Eielson does not house park administrative offices nor does it have an auditorium for large gatherings or audio-visual presentations. As noted earlier, it is not a park service center.
- *Building makes use of the formal vocabulary and materials of contemporary (1945-1972) architecture:* Constructed of concrete and concrete block with massive window walls and a flat roof, Eielson typifies the modern architectural style of the era.
- *Overlapping functional spaces sometimes evident in floor plan:* All of the public spaces are on the main level where the interpretation room serves multiple uses as a protected viewing area, interpretive space and information center.
- *Entrances, exists, and other doorways often are wide:* The main entrance, which also originally served as the only exit, is a wide double doorway protected by the eave. With the addition of the covered walkway, the original entrance was moved and the foyer was expanded. The new entrance opened into the galleria, making it difficult to locate. As the entrance to the visitor center is the first important step in the interpretive path created within the visitor center, the goal was to make the entrance highly visible. Obscuring the entrance inside the galleria has had a negative impact on an important feature of the Eielson Visitor Center.
- *Building emphasizes visitor’s experience of spatial procession:* Eielson lacks this spatial procession considered so important to the visitors’ experience. As mentioned earlier, as originally designed Eielson had only one entrance. Visitors entered into a small foyer from which they could access the restrooms or move into the main room that housed the information desk, interpretive

displays, as well as providing a sheltered observation area. Here the procession stopped. To exit the building visitors have to exit through the entrance. This caused congestion. This lack of procession is atypical of contemporary modern architecture and the principles of managed visitor use espoused by Mission 66.

- *Siting of visitor center near landscape to be interpreted allows interpretive programs to extend into the visitor center.* Eielson's location was chosen specifically for its potential as an interpretive center.
- *Building's elevations are low profile, horizontal effect.* Constructed on a steep slope, Eielson presents a low, horizontal effect when viewed from the road above. However, when viewed from other vantage points, the building presents a sharp, vertical effect.
- *Building harmonizes with its setting through horizontality of massing, color, and texture of materials.* Unlike other Mission 66 Visitor Centers such as the Sitka National Historic Park Visitor Center, which was designed to blend with its environment, Eielson is incongruous with its setting. The building's design does not incorporate elements of a regional architectural style nor were local materials used to blend the building with its setting. The sharp angles of the building disrupt the gentle slope of the hillside. The hard texture of the concrete block is a contradiction to the soft rolling tundra and mounds of alpine plants that surround the building. The greenish-gray color of the building blends well with the graveled parking lot.
- *Buildings footprint is often ell-shaped, rectangular around a central courtyard, or a variation on these themes.* Eielson's original footprint, which somewhat resembled a modified ell-shape, was changed radically with the 1976 expansion of the restrooms and the addition of the viewing pavilion.
- *Use of naturalistic planting to partially screen building, utility areas, and parking as well as repair areas disturbed by construction.* Little if any landscaping has been done. Unlike other Mission 66 Visitor Centers that included naturalistic plantings screen parking lots or utilities and repair disturbed areas, the grounds around Eielson remain in a natural state. Although planters were often used to define entrances, they are not present at Eielson.
- *Outdoor spaces often incorporated into visitor center complex.* Eielson includes an outdoor picnic area, a parking lot, and trails. None of the outdoor spaces, however, are an actual extension of the interior spaces, but rather additions to the exterior.

II. Requirements for Exceptional Importance:

- *Building's period of significance must fall between 1956-1966: Eielson was designed in 1956 and constructed between 1958 and 1960, placing it within the Mission 66 era (1956-66).*
- *Building should possess substantial physical integrity to the period of significance: As originally designed and constructed, Eielson fell short of the Mission 66 Visitor Center model. The building's physical integrity as built was drastically impaired when the structure was expanded in 1976. The expansion, which included a wraparound covered galleria, a restroom addition, and an outdoor viewing pavilion, and removed the original entrance; doubling the size of the building and obliterating it's original appearance.*
- *Building should possess exceptional importance architecturally, as the work of a recognized architect or architectural firm, as an important stylistic example or functional prototype of Mission 66 program: Although Eielson was designed by the National Park Service's W.O.D.C., the structure is not attributed to any of the well-known Mission 66 designers. Eielson lacks the internal spatial features and visitor procession of a typical Mission 66 Visitor Center. In addition, Mission 66 planning documents state that the facility was intended to provide comfort for the Park visitors and interpret the scenic view shed rather than fulfill the functions of a typical Mission 66 visitor center.⁴*

Mission 66 Visitor Center:

The goal of the Mission 66 program was to preserve and protect the Nation's parks and monuments. While the restoration of existing facilities and the construction of new facilities were enormous tasks, the real significance of Mission 66 was the revolutionary concept of resource protection through managed use. The visitor center was the vehicle for implementing the new concept as well as the symbol of the modern efficiency of the new revitalized National Park System.

The concept of managing the visitor use of the nation's parks and monuments was a direct response to years of overuse and abuse. For decades, budget constraints and limited staff had contributed to parklands abuse. Park facilities fell into disrepair, while litter marred the pristine parklands and pollutants invaded fresh waters. Under the managed use concept, visitors would be informed and educated about park resources when entering the park and visitor access would be restricted to designated areas to limit their impact on the resources and prevent overcrowding. The visitor center provided a centralized location for the dissemination of information as well as a means of orchestrating the visitor's park experience.

To accomplish this goal, visitor centers were located in areas most likely to be impacted by visitation: the main entrance of the park, a particular landscape feature, or near a

⁴ NPS, DOI, Mission 66 for Prospectus Mt. McKinley National Park, (April 1956, Microfilm 314/D, AKSO).

developed area. In addition, the visitor center provided three public use areas. These areas included space for public recreation, assembly, and interpretation. The visitor center lobby served as an information center for recreational opportunities in and around the park as well as an assembly hall. The auditorium/Audio-Visual Room and exhibit space/museum met the program's interpretive requirements as well as public assembly. In smaller parks, the visitor center also included an administrative office or wing and a maintenance compound, both of which were deliberately separated from the public use areas.⁵

History of Eielson Visitor Center:

Eielson Visitor Center is located on a tundra bluff above the Thorofare River at Mile 66 of the Denali Park Road. The treeless alpine tundra setting supports a wide, colorful variety of plant life, including blue forget-me-nots, purple mountain saxifrage, cranberries, and pink moss campion. The south facing visitor center offers an extraordinary view of Mount McKinley some thirty-three miles away and the surrounding snow covered peaks. To the south and west of the visitor center, the expansive Muldrow Glacier cascades from the McKinley Massiff trailing off into miles of glacial moraine.

This spectacular view attracted attention early in the park's development. Touring the Park in 1929, NPS Landscape Architect Thomas Vint envisioned a hotel on the slope. In 1932 the Alaska Road Commission extended the new park road to this location, and continued from there westward toward Wonder Lake. The park concessionaire, Mt. McKinley Tourist and Transportation Company, established a tent camp on the site in 1933, and in 1935 the Park superintendent proposed constructing an interpretive museum on the site. Then in 1939, with the opening of the new park hotel, the park concessionaire closed the tent camp it operated at Savage River since 1923. Some of the equipment from Savage was moved to the Eielson site. Prior to his death, Jim Galen, head of Mt. McKinley Tourist and Transportation Company, had also planned to construct a hotel on the site.⁶

Nearly two decades later these plans came a step closer to being a reality through the Park Service's Mission 66 program. The goal of Mission 66 was to alleviate overcrowding in NPS areas, enhance the visitor experience, and repair the damage caused by decades of chronic under-funding. In the case of Mount McKinley National Park, which was virtually undeveloped, Mission 66 meant new facilities to meet the needs of increased visitation resulting from the opening of the Denali Highway. Slated to open in 1957, the Denali Highway would link the park to the territorial road system and the AlCan Highway. Denali's Mission 66 Prospectus recommended the construction of four visitor centers to enhance the visitor's experience.

⁵ Monroe, Cecil Doty and Mission 66, (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1986), p. 80-88, 90.

⁶ NPS, DOI, A History of the Denali – Mt. McKinley Region, Alaska. by William E. Brown, (Atlanta, Georgia: GPO, 1991), p. 181, 194; November 21, 1941 Memo. From Super to Regional Director.

Two of the four new visitor centers were to be constructed in areas of visitor concentration, one near the entrance to the park and one at Wonder Lake. These visitor centers would provide exhibit space and auditorium facilities. The other two centers were to be interpretive centers. In this plan, the Eielson site was designated an interpretive site with visitor services limited to comfort stations. In the 1957 revision, after engineers concluded that the Polychrome Pass site that had originally been selected for this purpose lacked sufficient water to support such a facility, the Eielson site was upgraded to include interpretive space. The 1957 document made it clear that the facility proposed for Eielson was not intended to be a complete Visitor Center, but a smaller facility that would house an exhibit area, lunching space (it does not specify if this is inside the building or not), restrooms and employee accommodations.⁷

In preparation for the proposed development, the Western Office of Design and Construction (W.O.D.C.) in San Francisco drafted plans for "Small Visitor-Center Building" in 1956. Park Superintendent Duane Jacobs noted in his December 1956 monthly report that the preliminary designs had been reviewed and were found to be excellent. The preliminary drawings depicted a small compact building with a flat roof. Typical of Mission 66 construction, specifications included modern building materials such as concrete block and metal frame windows. The main floor included an interpretive room with two massive window walls and an information desk, an office for the local interpretive ranger, a small multi-use room, and restrooms. A small apartment and storage area was located in an exposed basement under the interpretive room. In February 1958, the Superintendent's Monthly Report noted that the invitation for construction bids had been opened to the public. In March, the contract was awarded to J. W. Warrick of Seattle with construction slated to begin in July 1958. July 1960, the building was completed.⁸

For all practical purposes, the construction of Eielson marked the beginning and the end of Mount McKinley National Park's Mission 66 development of visitor services. Although thirty (30) miles of the park road was widened and thirteen (13) miles were paved as part of the Mission 66 development, public sentiment derailed additional development in the park. Although a main visitor center would eventually be constructed at the park entrance, Mount McKinley National Park's Mission 66 development plans were scrapped in favor of retaining the bucolic atmosphere of the park.

Although development within the boundaries of the park was abandoned, it proceeded outside of the parklands. Twelve years after Eielson opened, the Parks Highway linked Mount McKinley National Park to Anchorage and Fairbanks. As a result, by 1972 park visitation had doubled. The increased visitation overwhelmed Eielson and forced the

⁷ NPS, DOI, Mission 66 Prospectus for Mt. McKinley National Park, (April 1956, Microfilm 314/D, AKSO).

⁸ IBID; NPS, DOI, Superintendent's Reports, Mt. McKinley National Park, 1956-1960, (Archives Denali National Park and Preserve); NPS, DOI, Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type by Sarah Allaback, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1999), p. 273-5.

expansion of the building. A galleria was added to the front of the building creating a new entrance and expanding the original foyer. During the 1980s, a Dispatch Office was constructed at the northeast corner of the galleria. The east wall of the building was demolished and an addition was added that tripled the size of the restrooms. A viewing pavilion, which was connected to the new galleria by an elevated walkway, was also constructed. Constructed of concrete block and covered with flat roofs, these additions doubled the size of the original building.⁹

Physical description:

Perched on the slope above the Thorofare River, the Eielson Visitor Center presents a startling contrast to the surrounding landscape. The hard lines, sharp angles, and sweeping flat roofs of the concrete building are a drastic contrast to the gentle slope of the mountainside and the soft mounds of tundra and native shrubs that cover it.

Originally constructed in 1958, the approximately 2000 square foot building seems to have characteristics in form and fenestration of the International Style. The flat roof and the smooth, uniform, unadorned exterior surfaces of the concrete block walls are typical of the style. Other typical elements such as the cantilevered floor and the large wraparound windows of the interpretive room are also typical. The walls are punctuated with relatively flat aluminum windows. The 1976 addition continued some stylistic reference to the original style through the use of ribboned windows and a horizontal flat roof.

Accessed from the gravel parking lot, the original concrete block structure housed two restrooms, a small multipurpose room, a ranger's office, and an interpretive room. A daylight basement under the interpretive room housed living quarters for the interpretive staff.

As originally constructed, visitors entered through a set of metal doors with large windows into a small foyer that provided access to the restrooms on one side and the small multipurpose room on the other. Directly ahead was an "L" shaped interpretive room. The focal point of the room were two large window walls cantilevered out over the foundation and slanted outward as they rose to the ceiling to create an uninterrupted view the Alaska Range as well as majestic Mt. McKinley. Low cushioned benches lined the base of both window walls. The original lighting consisted of metal rimmed recessed ceiling lights. The concrete block walls were painted.

The 1976 expansion drastically altered the exterior and interior of the building. The expansion enlarged the 2,000 square foot footprint of the original building to over 4,500 square feet. Major changes included the construction of a 1025 square foot outdoor viewing pavilion, a 900 square foot wraparound galleria, and a 500 square foot restroom

⁹ NPS, DOI, DENA Archives, "Alternative Transportation Systems for Reducing Natural Resources Impact" by Gary Brown.

addition to the eastside of the original building. These additions changed the building from a small, rather square building to a long lineal structure, which paralleled the existing gravel parking lot.

The 1976 expansion of Eielson also altered the interior space. The original entrance was modified by the addition of an enclosed arctic entrance at the west end of the gallery. The walls of the new entrance were covered with wood paneling. The entire east wall of the original building was demolished to allow for the expansion of the restrooms and to provide additional exits. As in the original restrooms, the lower half of the walls and the floor were covered with ceramic tile. Protruding glass light fixtures were installed in the new spaces and existing light fixtures were augmented with plastic track lighting.

The new viewing pavilion consisted of a raised square platform situated to the east and south of the original visitor center. Constructed of concrete and concrete block, the pavilion was covered with a flat roof, which was offset to match the projection of the roof over the interpretive room. The base of the shelter provided additional storage and a maintenance room. A wooded railing extended along the walkway and around the pavilion.

With park visitation over 300,000 a year since 1986, Eielson shows the signs of wear and general deterioration. The most noticeable deterioration, however, is where the 1976 addition joins the original structure. Running throughout the building is a large, ever-increasing crack believed to be the result of the slope settlement due to improper construction and aggravated perhaps by seismic forces on the building. The structural deterioration and the 1976 modifications have had an adverse impact on the structural integrity and the original architectural character of the building.



IN REPLY REFER TO

United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Denali National Park and Preserve
Post Office Box 9
Denali Park, Alaska 99755

7/30/02
RECEIVED

JUL 25 2002

OHA

H4217 (DENA-SCR)

July 24, 2002

Ms. Judith Bittner
State Historic Preservation Officer
Department of Natural Resources
Office of History and Archaeology
550 W. 7th Avenue, Suite 1310
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-3565

*Deferred to
next week*

Dear Ms. Bittner:

Enclosed is an edited version of the Eielson Visitor Center Determination of Eligibility (DOE). Attached to the end of the DOE are responses to the questions OHA staff had about the DOE. The additional information provided in the responses should help clarify both the Mission 66 registration requirements and the description of the visitor center. Park staff provided OHA staff with a copy of the book Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of a Building Type, by Sarah Allaback and additional drawings of the visitor center.

If you have any questions during this phase of the review process, please contact Ann Kain, Cultural Resource Manager at (907) 644-3227 or at Ann_Kain@NPS.GOV.

Sincerely,

Paul R. Anderson
Superintendent

Enclosure

Determination of Eligibility Eielson Visitor Center, Denali National Park and Preserve

- Original Design: 1956
- Designer: National Park Service (NPS), Western Office of Design and Construction (W.O.D.C.)
- Date of Construction: 1958-1960
- Alteration: 1974-1976¹

Statement of Significance:

Constructed between 1958-60 during the Mission 66 era and drastically altered between 1974-76, the Eielson Visitor Center does not meet National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) Criteria A or C registration requirements as defined in *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type*.² Although associated with Mission 66, the Eielson Visitor Center does not exemplify the programmatic goals of Mission 66 nor did the Mission 66 program have a lasting effect on the development of Denali National Park and Preserve. In addition, the Eielson Visitor Center lacks any notable association with other events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history as required under Criteria A. Since Eielson Visitor Center is not the work of a master architect, does it possess high artistic values, and was radically altered in 1976; it is not eligible under Criteria C. In addition, in accordance to NRHP Criteria Consideration G, Eielson lacks the higher standard of integrity required for a building less than fifty years old to be eligible for the NRHP.

Registration Requirements for Mission 66 Visitor Centers³

The following requirements for registering a Mission 66 Visitor Center in the National Register of Historic Places (see italicized text) are paraphrased from the registration requirements set forth in *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type* Appendix III.

I. Eligibility requirements for 50-year old Mission 66 Visitor Centers:

1. *The Visitor Center's period of significance should fall within the years 1945-1972:*
Eielson Visitor Center was designed and constructed during the Mission 66 era, 1956-1966. The preliminary designs for the building were drawn in 1956. Construction began in 1958 and the building was completed in 1960.

¹ The design drawings are dated to 1974, but long-time park employee Steve Carwile has stated that the alteration was not completed until 1976.

² NPS, DOI, *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type* by Sarah Allaback, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1999).

³ IBID, p. 267-268.

statehood
road to visitor
industry
opening Denali
New
center Parks Hwy

2. *The Visitor Center should retain most or all of the physical characteristics associated with Mission 66 Visitor Center property type.* Although identified as a visitor center, Eielson was designed as an interpretive center and rest stop, a function that continues today. Eielson provides limited interpretive displays and park information, but does not provide a full array of Mission 66 program elements such as an auditorium, public gathering facilities, or administrative facilities. Although Eielson houses the local staff, it does not house park administrative services. As a result, Eielson can not be considered a complete Mission 66 Visitor Center as defined in Sarah Allaback's book *Mission 66 Visitor Centers*.
3. *The Visitor Center should retain physical integrity to the period of significance.* Eielson Visitor Center's physical integrity was drastically impaired when the structure was expanded in 1974-76. The expansion, which included a wraparound covered galleria, a restroom addition, and an outdoor viewing pavilion, changed the building's original appearance from compact, square with a highly visible entrance to sprawling linear form and obscured the entrance.
4. *The visitor center should embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction that represents high artistic values.*
 - *Building siting in relationship to visitor flow:* Eielson is located on the park road at a site that has long been recognized for its excellent view of Mt. McKinley and the adjacent landscape.
 - *Building design emphasizes plan organization:* Eielson differs from the usual Mission 66 Visitor Center building design in the lack of efficient "visitor flow." Unlike other Mission 66 Visitor Centers, which were designed to encourage procession through the building and out into the park, the design of Eielson does not allow this procession. The design forces the visitor to exit against the flow of incoming visitors through the same door that they entered. The 1976 addition provided an additional exit from the building on to the walkway, but the exit is located at the far end of the new restroom addition away from the sink area and does not encourage procession.
 - *The Building's program centralizes numerous park services:* Eielson provides park information, interpretive displays, and restrooms as well as the viewing areas. Eielson does not house park administrative offices nor does it have an auditorium for large gatherings or audio-visual presentations. As noted earlier, it is not a park service center.
 - *Building makes use of the formal vocabulary and materials of contemporary (1945-1972) architecture:* Constructed of concrete and concrete block with massive window walls and a flat roof, Eielson typifies the modern architectural style of the era.

- *Overlapping functional spaces sometimes evident in floor plan:* All of the public spaces are on the main level where the interpretation room serves multiple uses as a protected viewing area, interpretive space and information center.
- *Entrances, exists, and other doorways often are wide:* The main entrance, which also originally served as the only exit, is a wide double doorway protected by the eave. With the addition of the covered walkway, the original entrance was moved and the foyer was expanded. The new entrance opened into the galleria, making it difficult to locate. As the entrance to the visitor center is the first important step in the interpretive path created within the visitor center, the goal was to make the entrance highly visible. Obscuring the entrance inside the galleria has had a negative impact on an important feature of the Eielson Visitor Center.
- *Building emphasizes visitor's experience of spatial procession:* Eielson lacks this spatial procession considered so important to the visitors' experience. As mentioned earlier, as originally designed Eielson had only one entrance. Visitors entered into a small foyer from which they could access the restrooms or move into the main room that housed the information desk, interpretive displays, as well as providing a sheltered observation area. Here the procession stopped. To exit the building visitors have to exit through the entrance. This caused congestion. This lack of procession is atypical of contemporary modern architecture and the principles of managed visitor use espoused by Mission 66.
- *Siting of visitor center near landscape to be interpreted allows interpretive programs to extend into the visitor center.* Eielson's location was chosen specifically for its potential as an interpretive center.
- *Building's elevations are low profile, horizontal effect.* Constructed on a steep slope, Eielson presents a low, horizontal effect when viewed from the road above. However, when viewed from other vantage points, the building presents a sharp, vertical effect.
- *Building harmonizes with its setting through horizontality of massing, color, and texture of materials.* Unlike other Mission 66 Visitor Centers such as the Sitka National Historic Park Visitor Center, which was designed to blend with its environment, Eielson is incongruous with its setting. The building's design does not incorporate elements of a regional architectural style nor were local materials used to blend the building with its setting. The sharp angles of the building disrupt the gentle slope of the hillside. The hard texture of the concrete block is a contradiction to the soft rolling tundra and mounds of alpine plants that surround the building. The greenish-gray color of the building blends well with the graveled parking lot.

- *Buildings footprint is often ell-shaped, rectangular around a central courtyard, or a variation on these themes.* Eielson's original footprint, which somewhat resembled a modified ell-shape, was changed radically with the 1976 expansion of the restrooms and the addition of the viewing pavilion.
- Use of naturalistic planting to partially screen building, utility areas, and parking as well as repair areas disturbed by construction. Little if any landscaping has been done. Unlike other Mission 66 Visitor Centers that included naturalistic plantings screen parking lots or utilities and repair disturbed areas, the grounds around Eielson remain in a natural state. Although planters were often used to define entrances, they are not present at Eielson.
- *Outdoor spaces often incorporated into visitor center complex.* Eielson includes an outdoor picnic area, a parking lot, and trails. None of the outdoor spaces, however, are an actual extension of the interior spaces, but rather additions to the exterior.

II. Requirements for Exceptional Importance:

- *Building's period of significance must fall between 1956-1966:* Eielson was designed in 1956 and constructed between 1958 and 1960, placing it within the Mission 66 era (1956-66).
- *Building should possess substantial physical integrity to the period of significance:* As originally designed and constructed, Eielson fell short of the Mission 66 Visitor Center model. The building's physical integrity as built was drastically impaired when the structure was expanded in 1976. The expansion, which included a wraparound covered galleria, a restroom addition, and an outdoor viewing pavilion, and removed the original entrance; doubling the size of the building and obliterating it's original appearance.
- *Building should possess exceptional importance architecturally, as the work of a recognized architect or architectural firm, as an important stylistic example or functional prototype of Mission 66 program:* Although Eielson was designed by the National Park Service's W.O.D.C., the structure is not attributed to any of the well-known Mission 66 designers. Eielson lacks the internal spatial features and visitor procession of a typical Mission 66 Visitor Center. In addition, Mission 66 planning documents state that the facility was intended to provide comfort for the Park visitors and interpret the scenic view shed rather than fulfill the functions of a typical Mission 66 visitor center.⁴

⁴ NPS, DOI, Mission 66 for Prospectus Mt. McKinley National Park, (April 1956, Microfilm 314/D, AKSO).

Mission 66 Visitor Center:

The goal of the Mission 66 program was to preserve and protect the Nation's parks and monuments. While the restoration of existing facilities and the construction of new facilities were enormous tasks, the real significance of Mission 66 was the revolutionary concept of resource protection through managed use. The visitor center was the vehicle for implementing the new concept as well as the symbol of the modern efficiency of the new revitalized National Park System.

The concept of managing the visitor use of the nation's parks and monuments was a direct response to years of overuse and abuse. For decades, budget constraints and limited staff had contributed to parklands abuse. Park facilities fell into disrepair, while litter marred the pristine parklands and pollutants invaded fresh waters. Under the managed use concept, visitors would be informed and educated about park resources when entering the park and visitor access would be restricted to designated areas to limit their impact on the resources and prevent overcrowding. The visitor center provided a centralized location for the dissemination of information as well as a means of orchestrating the visitor's park experience.

To accomplish this goal, visitor centers were located in areas most likely to be impacted by visitation: the main entrance of the park, a particular landscape feature, or near a developed area. In addition, the visitor center provided three public use areas. These areas included space for public recreation, assembly, and interpretation. The visitor center lobby served as an information center for recreational opportunities in and around the park as well as an assembly hall. The auditorium/Audio-Visual Room and exhibit space/museum met the program's interpretive requirements as well as public assembly. In smaller parks, the visitor center also included an administrative office or wing and a maintenance compound, both of which were deliberately separated from the public use areas.⁵

History of Eielson Visitor Center:

Eielson Visitor Center is located on a tundra bluff above the Thorofare River at Mile 66 of the Denali Park Road. The treeless alpine tundra setting supports a wide, colorful variety of plant life, including blue forget-me-nots, purple mountain saxifrage, cranberries, and pink moss campion. The south facing visitor center offers an extraordinary view of Mount McKinley some thirty miles away and the surrounding snow covered peaks. To the south and west of the visitor center, the expansive Muldrow Glacier cascades from the McKinley Massiff trailing off into miles of glacial moraine.

This spectacular view attracted attention early in the park's development. Touring the Park in 1929, NPS Landscape Architect Thomas Vint envisioned a hotel on the slope. In 1932 the Alaska Road Commission extended the new park road to this location, and

⁵ Monroe, Cecil Doty and Mission 66, (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1986), p. 80-88, 90.

continued from there to with the road westward toward Wonder Lake. The park concessionaire, Mt. McKinley Tourist and Transportation Company established a tent camp on the site in 1933 and in 1935, the Park superintendent proposed constructing an interpretive museum on the site. Then in 1939, the park concessionaire closed the tent camp it operated at Savage River since 1923, and moved that camp to the Eielson site. Prior to his death, Jim Galen head of Mt. McKinley Tourist and Transportation Company had also planned to construct a hotel on the site.⁶

Nearly two decades later these plans came a step closer to being a reality through the Park Service's Mission 66 program. The goal of Mission 66 was to alleviate overcrowding in NPS areas, enhance the visitor's experience, and repair the damage caused by decades of chronic under-funding. In the case of Denali, which was virtually undeveloped, Mission 66 meant new facilities to meet the needs of increased visitation resulting from the opening of the Denali Highway. Slated to open in 1957, the Denali Highway would link the park to the territorial road system and the AlCan Highway. Denali's Mission 66 Prospectus recommended the construction of four visitor centers to enhance the visitor's experience.

Two of the four new visitor centers were to be constructed in areas of visitor concentration, one near the entrance to the park and one at Wonder Lake. These visitor centers would provide exhibit space and auditorium facilities. The other two centers were to be interpretive centers. In this plan, the Eielson site was designated an interpretive site with visitor services limited to comfort stations. In the 1957 revision after engineers concluded that the Polychrome Pass site that had originally been selected for this purpose lacked sufficient water to support such a facility, the Eielson site was upgraded to include interpretive space. The 1957 document made it clear that the facility proposed for Eielson was not intended to be a complete Visitor Center, but a smaller facility that would house an exhibit area, lunching space (it does not specify if this is inside the building or not), restrooms and employee accommodations.⁷

In preparation for the proposed development, the Western Office of Design and Construction (W.O.D.C.) in San Francisco drafted plans for "Small Visitor-Center Building" in 1956. Park Superintendent Duane Jacobs noted in his December 1956 monthly report that the preliminary designs had been reviewed and were found to be excellent. The preliminary drawings depicted a small compact building with a flat roof. Typical of Mission 66 construction, specifications included modern building materials such as concrete block and metal frame windows. The main floor included an interpretive room with two massive window walls and an information desk, an office for the local interpretive ranger, a small multi-use room, and restrooms. A small apartment and storage area was located in an exposed basement under the interpretive room. In February 1958, the Superintendent's Monthly Report noted that the invitation for

⁶ NPS, DOI, A History of the Denali – Mt. McKinley Region, Alaska. by William E. Brown, (Atlanta, Georgia: GPO, 1991), p. 181, 194; November 21, 1941 Memo. From Super to Regional Director.

⁷ NPS, DOI, Mission 66 Prospectus for Mt. McKinley National Park, (April 1956, Microfilm 314/D, AKSO).

construction bids had been opened to the public. In March, the contract was awarded to J. W. Warrick of Seattle with construction slated to begin in July 1958. July 1960, the building was completed.⁸

For all practical purposes, the construction of Eielson marked the beginning and the end of Denali's Mission 66 development of visitor services. Although thirty-three (33) miles of the park road was widened and thirteen (13) miles were paved as part of the Mission 66 development, public sentiment derailed additional development in the park. Although a main visitor center would eventually be constructed at the park entrance, Denali's Mission 66 development plans were scraped in favor of retaining the bucolic atmosphere of the park.

Although development within the boundaries of the park was abandoned, it proceeded outside of the parklands. Twelve years after Eielson opened, the Parks Highway linked the Denali to Anchorage and Fairbanks. As a result, by 1972 park visitation had doubled. The increased visitation overwhelmed Eielson and forced the expansion of the building. A galleria was added to the front of the building creating a new entrance and expanding the original foyer. During the 1980s, a Dispatch Office was constructed at the northeast corner of the galleria. The east wall of the building was demolished and an addition was added that tripled the size of the restrooms. A viewing pavilion, which was connected to the new galleria by an elevated walkway, was also constructed. Constructed of concrete block and covered with flat roofs, these additions doubled the size of the original building.⁹

Physical description:

Perched on the slope above the Thorofare River, the Eielson Visitor Center presents a startling contrast to the surrounding landscape. The hard lines, sharp angles, and sweeping flat roofs of the concrete building are a drastic contrast to the gentle slope of the mountainside and the soft mounds of tundra and native shrubs that cover it.

Originally constructed in 1958, the approximately 2000 square foot building seems to have characteristics in form and fenestration of the International Style. The flat roof and the smooth, uniform, unadorned exterior surfaces of the concrete block walls are typical of the style. Other typical elements such as the cantilevered floor and the large wraparound windows of the interpretive room are also typical. The walls are punctuated with relatively flat aluminum windows. The 1976 addition continued some stylistic reference to the original style through the use of ribboned windows and a horizontal flat roof.

⁸ IBID; NPS, DOI, Superintendent's Reports, Mt. McKinley National Park, 1956-1960, (Archives Denali National Park and Preserve); NPS, DOI, Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type by Sarah Allaback, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1999), p. 273-5.

⁹ NPS, DOI, DENA Archives, "Alternative Transportation Systems for Reducing Natural Resources Impact" by Gary Brown.

Accessed from the gravel parking lot, the original concrete block structure housed two restrooms, a small multipurpose room, a ranger's office, and an interpretive room. A daylight basement under the interpretive room housed living quarters for the interpretive staff.

As originally constructed, visitors entered through a set of metal doors with large windows into a small foyer that provided access to the restrooms on one side and the small multipurpose room on the other. Directly ahead was an "L" shaped interpretive room. The focal point of the room were two large window walls cantilevered out over the foundation and slanted outward as they rose to the ceiling to create an uninterrupted view the Alaska Range as well as majestic Mt. McKinley. Low cushioned benches lined the base of both window walls. The original lighting consisted of metal rimmed recessed ceiling lights. The concrete block walls were painted.

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The 1976 expansion drastically altered the exterior and interior of the building. The expansion enlarged the 2,000 square foot footprint of the original building to over 4,500 square feet. Major changes included the construction of a 1025 square foot outdoor viewing pavilion, a 900 square foot wraparound galleria, and a 500 square foot restroom addition to the eastside of the original building. These additions changed the building from a small, rather square building to a long lineal structure, which paralleled the existing gravel parking lot.

The 1976 expansion of Eielson also altered the interior space. The original entrance was modified by the addition of an enclosed arctic entrance at the west end of the galleria. The walls of the new entrance were covered with wood paneling. The entire east wall of the original building was demolished to allow for the expansion of the restrooms and to provide additional exits. As in the original restrooms, the lower half of the walls and the floor were covered with ceramic tile. Protruding glass light fixtures were installed in the new spaces and existing light fixtures were augmented with plastic track lighting.

The new viewing pavilion consisted of a raised square platform situated to the east and south of the original visitor center. Constructed of concrete and concrete block, the pavilion was covered with a flat roof, which was offset to match the projection of the roof over the interpretive room. The base of the shelter provided additional storage and a maintenance room. A wooded railing extended along the walkway and around the pavilion.

With park visitation over 300,000 a year since 1986, Eielson shows the signs of wear and general deterioration. The most noticeable deterioration, however, is where the 1976 addition joins the original structure. Running throughout the building is a large, ever-increasing crack believed to be the result of the slope settlement due to improper construction and aggravated perhaps by seismic forces on the building. The structural deterioration and the 1976 modifications have had an adverse impact on the structural integrity and the original architectural character of the building.

SHPO Questions on Eielson:

Eielson Visitor Center is being considered under the criteria for Mission 66 Visitor Centers, because (regardless of the fact that is a very poor example) it was and is a visitor center.

in name only

1) Spatial Organization:

- The purpose of a Mission 66 visitor center was to manage park use by informing the visitors about the park and the local amenities, directing visitor traffic and providing immediate relief for road weary travelers. Spatial procession through the visitor center or the sequence of spaces in the visitor center was crucial to providing these services to a large number of visitors. Beginning at the entry, the arrangement of spaces within the visitor center created an interpretive path that led visitors from one public space to the next finally culminating at an entry/exit that led out into the park. Spatial procession enhanced the visitor experience, while at the same time reduced congestion and the number of staff.¹

Eielson lacks this spatial procession considered so important to the visitors' experience. As mentioned earlier, as originally designed Eielson had only one entrance. Visitors entered into a small foyer from which they could access the restrooms or move into the main room that housed the information desk, interpretive displays, as well as providing a sheltered observation area. Here the procession stopped. To exit the building visitors have to exit through the entrance. This caused congestion. This lack of procession is atypical of contemporary modern architecture and the principles of managed visitor use espoused by Mission 66.

- **1974-76 Addition:** The expansion of the restrooms included an outside entrance. This improved access to the restrooms, but did not improve spatial procession. While some visitors may exit through the outside entrance the location of the exit, (the opposite end of the room from the wash basins) does not encourage this use.

- **Alterations to Entrance:** With the 1974-76 addition of the galleria, Eielson's entrance was realigned to face the galleria. This realignment obscured the entrance, making it difficult to locate. As the entrance to the visitor center is the first important step in the interpretive path created within the visitor center, the goal was to make the entrance highly visible. Obscuring the entrance inside the galleria has had a negative impact on an important feature of the Eielson Visitor Center.

2) Lack of central services: The goal of the Mission 66 visitor center was to provide centralized visitor services in one easily accessible location. Thus, the building included a wide variety of services - park information, interpretive services, comfort facilities as well as park administrative facilities and sometimes maintenance facilities. Eielson was not designed to provide administrative services nor does it have innovative interpretive facilities such as auditorium or

¹ For more on role of spatial procession in the Mission 66 Visitor Center see Alaback 221-225, 269.

audio-visual room. Since Eielson lacks the full range of services attributed to a typical Mission 66 visitor center, it should not be considered a complete visitor center. (For more on these, Visitor Center elements see Allaback page 268-269.)

3) **Site harmony:** While this requirement may easily be misconstrued as a matter of personal taste, Mission 66 architects and designers made a concerted effort to blend new structures with the existing environment to create a sense of harmony within the site. Typically, local materials such as native stone and/or wood or elements of a regional architectural style were integrated into a design so that it would blend with the existing built and/or natural environment. An excellent example of both of these techniques is the Sitka National Historical Park Visitor Center. The Sitka Visitor Center harmonizes with its setting and environment through the use of local timbers in a design that is strongly reminiscent of a regional architectural form, that of the Tlingit Clan House. Eielson Visitor Center does not reflect a regional architectural style nor were local materials used to create a sense of harmony with the setting or the environment.

4) Landscape vs. Landscaping:

- Landscaping or the manipulation of the natural environment was a usual component of most Mission 66 visitor centers. Naturalistic plants were used to screen buildings, utility areas, and parking lots as well as repair disturbed areas. Planter boxes were often used to define entrances. (Allaback page 275. See also photographs on pages 220, 231, and 233 that illustrate Mission 66 landscaping efforts using native plants in the desert southwest.) With the exception of the vegetation around the picnic area that may or may not be natural, grounds around Eielson appear to have been left in a natural state.

5) Addition as part of the original plans: No, this was not in the original plans.

6) Architectural Awards for Eielson design: Eielson received no architectural awards and was not designed by any well known architect.



IN REPLY REFER TO

United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Denali National Park and Preserve
Post Office Box 9
Denali Park, Alaska 99755

H4217 (DENA-SCR)

June 24, 2002

Ms. Judith Bittner
State Historic Preservation Officer
Department of Natural Resources
Office of History and Archaeology
550 W. 7th Avenue, Suite 1310
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-3565

RECEIVED

JUN 28 2002

OHA

Dear Ms. Bittner:

In compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. Sec. 470f, as amended, 90 Stat. 1320), we are submitting for your review a Determination of Eligibility for Eielson Visitor Center in Denali National Park and Preserve. The Park hopes to replace the building with a new one that better suits visitor needs and numbers.

Eielson Visitor Center is located at mile 66 of the park road. The visitor center was constructed 1958-60 during the Mission 66 program. Based on the evaluation criteria for Mission 66 visitor centers developed in Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of a Building Type, by Sarah Allaback the park has come to the conclusion that Eielson does meet the criteria established in Allaback's book. The building lacks the defining elements of a Mission 66 Visitor Center, such as visitor flow or procession through the building and is unequipped to provide the full array of visitor services. The park also finds the building ineligible under Criterion C because of a major alteration in 1974. -?? A?

If you have any questions during the review process, please contact Ann Kain, Cultural Resource Manager at (907) 644-3227 or at Ann_Kain@NPS.GOV.

Sincerely,

acting for:

Paul R. Anderson
Superintendent

Enclosure

Determination of Eligibility

Eielson Visitor Center, Denali National Park and Preserve

Original Design: 1956

Designer: National Park Service (NPS), Western Office of Design and Construction
(W.O.D.C.)

Date of Construction: 1958-1960

Alteration: 1974

Statement of Significance:

Constructed between 1958-60 during the Mission 66 era and drastically altered in 1974, the Eielson Visitor Center does not meet National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) Criteria A or C registration requirements as defined in *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type*.¹ Although associated with Mission 66, the Eielson Visitor Center does not exemplify the programmatic goals of Mission 66 nor did the Mission 66 program have a lasting effect on the development of Denali National Park and Preserve. In addition, the Eielson Visitor Center lacks any notable association with other events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history as required under Criteria A. Since Eielson Visitor Center is not the work of a master architect nor does it possess high artistic values, and was radically altered in 1974; it is not eligible under Criteria C. In addition, in accordance to NRHP Criteria Consideration G, Eielson lacks the higher standard of integrity required for buildings less than fifty years old to be eligible for the NRHP.

Registration Requirements for Mission 66 Visitor Centers²

The following requirements for registering a Mission 66 Visitor Center in the National Register of Historic Places (see italicized text) are paraphrased from the registration requirements set forth in *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type* Appendix III.

I. Eligibility requirements for 50-year old Mission 66 Visitor Centers:

1. *The Visitor Center's period of significance should fall within the years 1945-1972:* Eielson Visitor Center was designed and constructed during the Mission 66 era, 1956-1966. The preliminary designs for the building were drawn in 1956. Construction began in 1958 and the building was completed in 1960.
2. *The Visitor Center should retain most or all of the physical characteristics associated with Mission 66 Visitor Center property type.* The Eielson Visitor Center was

¹ NPS, DOI, *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type* by Sarah Allaback, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1999).

² IBID, p. 267-268.

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intended as an interpretive center and rest stop, which it continues to do today. Eielson provides limited interpretive displays and park information, but does not provide a full array of Mission 66 program elements such as an auditorium or public gathering facilities. Although Eielson houses the local staff, it does not provide administrative services. As a result, Eielson can not be considered a complete Mission 66 Visitor Center as defined.

3. *The Visitor Center should retain physical integrity to the period of significance.*
Eielson Visitor Center's physical integrity was drastically impaired when the structure was expanded in 1974. The expansion, which included a wraparound covered galleria, a restroom addition, and an outdoor viewing pavilion, changed the building's original appearance from compact, square with a highly visible entrance to sprawling linear form and obscured the entrance.
4. *The visitor center should embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction that represents high artistic values.*
 - *Building siting in relationship to visitor flow:* Eielson is located on the park road at a site that has long been recognized for its excellent view of Mt. McKinley and the adjacent landscape.
 - *Building design emphasizes plan organization:* Eielson differs from the usual Mission 66 Visitor Center building design in the lack of efficient "visitor flow." Unlike other Mission 66 Visitor Centers, which were designed to encourage procession through the building and out into the park, the design of Eielson forces the visitor to exit through the same door that they entered. The 1974 addition provided an additional exit from the building on to the shelter walkway, but the obscure location of the new exit does not encourage procession.
 - *The Building's program centralizes numerous park services:* Eielson provides park information, interpretive displays, and restrooms as well as the viewing areas. As noted earlier, it is not a park service center.
 - *Building makes use of the formal vocabulary and materials of contemporary (1945-1972) architecture:* Constructed of concrete and concrete block with massive window walls and a flat roof, Eielson typifies the modern architectural style of the era.
 - *Overlapping functional spaces sometimes evident in floor plan:* All of the public spaces are on the main level where the interpretation room serves multiple uses as a protected viewing area, interpretive space and information center.
 - *Entrances, exists, and other doorways often are wide:* The main entrance, which also originally served as the only exit, is a wide double doorway protected by the eave. With the addition of the covered walkway, the original entrance was moved and the entryway was expanded.

- *Building emphasizes visitor's experience of spatial procession:* The building lacks any spatial procession. While the window walls of the interpretive room provide a spectacular view of the landscape, the lack of egress from the room literally traps the visitor in the room, thus negating the visitor's procession through the building.
- *Siting of visitor center near landscape to be interpreted allows interpretive programs to extend into the visitor center.* Eielson's location was chosen specifically for its potential as an interpretive center.
- *Building's elevations are low profile, horizontal effect.* Constructed on a steep slope, Eielson presents a low, horizontal effect when viewed from the road above. However, when viewed from other vantage points, the building presents a sharp, vertical effect.
- *Building harmonizes with its setting through horizontality of massing, color, and texture of materials.* Unlike other Mission 66 Visitor Centers such as the Sitka National Historic Park Visitor Center, which was designed to blend with its environment, Eielson is incongruous with its setting. The sharp angles of the building disrupt the gentle slope of the hillside. The hard texture of the concrete block is a contradiction to the soft rolling tundra and mounds of alpine plants that surround the building. The greenish-gray color of the building blends well with the graveled parking lot.
- *Buildings footprint is often ell-shaped, rectangular around a central courtyard, or a variation on these themes.* Eielson's original footprint, which somewhat resembled a modified ell-shape, was changed radically with the 1974 expansion of the restrooms and the addition of the viewing pavilion.
- *Use of naturalistic planting to partially screen building, utility areas, and parking as well as repair areas disturbed by construction.* Little if any landscaping has been done.
- *Outdoor spaces often incorporated into visitor center complex.* Eielson includes an outdoor picnic area, a parking lot, and trails. None of the outdoor spaces, however, are an actual extension of the interior spaces, but rather additions to the exterior.

II. Requirements for Exceptional Importance:

1. *Building's period of significance must fall between 1956-1966:* Eielson was designed in 1956 and constructed between 1958 and 1960, placing it within the Mission 66 era (1956-66).
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wraparound covered galleria, a restroom addition, and an outdoor viewing pavilion, and removed the original entrance; doubling the size of the building and obliterating it's original appearance.

3. *Building should possess exceptional importance architecturally, as the work of a recognized architect or architectural firm, as an important stylistic example or functional prototype of Mission 66 program:* Although Eielson was designed by the National Park Service's W.O.D.C., the structure is not attributed to any of the well-known Mission 66 designers. Eielson lacks the internal spatial features and visitor procession of a typical Mission 66 Visitor Center. In addition, Mission 66 planning documents state that the facility was intended to provide comfort for the Park visitors and interpret the scenic view shed rather than fulfill the functions of a typical Mission 66 visitor center.³

Mission 66 Visitor Center:

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The concept of managing the visitor use of the nation's parks and monuments was a direct response to years of overuse and abuse. For decades, budget constraints and limited staff had contributed to parklands abuse. Park facilities to fell into disrepair, while litter marred the pristine parklands and pollutants invaded fresh waters. Under the managed use concept, visitors would be informed and educated about park resources when entering the park and visitor access would be restricted to designated areas to limit their impact on the resources and prevent overcrowding. The visitor center provided a centralized location for the dissemination of information as well as a means of orchestrating the visitor's park experience.

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³ NPS, DOI, Mission 66 for Prospectus Mt. McKinley National Park, (April 1956, Microfilm 314/D, AKSO).

maintenance compound, both of which were deliberately separated from the public use areas.⁴

History of Eielson Visitor Center:

Eielson Visitor Center is located on a tundra bluff above the Thoroughfare River at Mile 66 of the Denali Park Road. The treeless alpine tundra setting supports a wide, colorful variety of plant life, including blue forget-me-nots, purple mountain saxifrage, cranberries, and pink moss campion. The south facing visitor center offers an extraordinary view of Mount McKinley some thirty miles away and the surrounding snow covered peaks. To the south and west of the visitor center, the expansive Muldrow Glacier cascades from the McKinley Massiff trailing off into miles of glacial moraine.

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⁴ Monroe, Cecil Doty and Mission 66, (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1986), p. 80-88, 90.

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In preparation for the proposed development, the Western Office of Design and Construction (W.O.D.C.) in San Francisco drafted plans for “Small Visitor-Center Building” in 1956. Park Superintendent Duane Jacobs noted in his December 1956 monthly report that the preliminary designs had been reviewed and were found to be excellent. The preliminary drawings depicted a small compact building with a flat roof. Typical of Mission 66 construction, specifications included modern building materials such as concrete block and metal frame windows. The main floor included an interpretive room with two massive window walls and an information desk, an office for the local interpretive ranger, a small multi-use room, and restrooms. A small apartment and storage area was located in an exposed basement under the interpretive room. In February 1958, the Superintendent’s Monthly Report noted that the invitation for construction bids had been opened to the public. In March, the contract was awarded to J. W. Warrick of Seattle with construction slated to begin in July 1958. July 1960, the building was completed.⁷

For all practical purposes, the construction of Eielson marked the beginning and the end of Denali’s Mission 66 development. Although thirty-three (33) miles of the park road was widened and thirteen (13) miles were paved as part of the Mission 66 development, public sentiment derailed additional development in the park. Although a main visitor center would eventually be constructed at the park entrance, Denali’s Mission 66 development plans were scraped in favor of retaining the bucolic atmosphere of the park.

Although development within the boundaries of the park was abandoned, it proceeded outside of the parklands. Twelve years after Eielson opened, the Parks Highway linked the Denali to Anchorage and Fairbanks. As a result, park visitation rose to 306,027 in 1972. The increased visitation overwhelmed Eielson and forced the expansion of the building. A galleria was added to the front of the building creating a new entrance and expanding the original foyer. The east wall of the building was demolished and an addition was added that tripled the size of the restrooms. A viewing pavilion, which was connected to the new galleria by an elevated walkway, was also constructed. Constructed of concrete block and covered with flat roofs, these additions doubled the size of the original building.⁸

⁶ NPS, DOI, Mission 66 Prospectus for Mt. McKinley National Park, (April 1956, Microfilm 314/D, AKSO).

⁷ IBID; NPS, DOI, Superintendent’s Reports, Mt. McKinley National Park, 1956-1960, (Archives Denali National Park and Preserve); NPS, DOI, Mission 66 Visitor Centers: the History of a Building Type by Sarah Allaback, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1999), p. 273-5.

⁸ NPS, DOI, DENA Archives, “Alternative Transportation Systems for Reducing Natural Resources Impact” by Gary Brown.

Physical description:

Perched on the slope above the Thoroughfare River, the Eielson Visitor Center presents a startling contrast to the surrounding landscape. The hard lines, sharp angles, and sweeping flat roofs of the concrete building are a drastic contrast to the gentle slope of the mountainside and the soft mounds of tundra and native shrubs that cover it.

Originally constructed in 1958, the approximately 2000 square foot building seems to have characteristics in form and fenestration of the International Style. The flat roof and the smooth, uniform, unadorned exterior surfaces of the concrete block walls are typical of the style. Other typical elements such as the cantilevered floor and the large wraparound windows of the interpretive room are also typical. The walls are punctuated with relatively flat aluminum windows. The 1974 addition continued some stylistic reference to the original style through the use of ribboned windows and a horizontal flat roof.

Accessed from the gravel parking lot, the original concrete block structure housed two restrooms, a small multipurpose room, a ranger's office, and an interpretive room. A daylight basement under the interpretive room housed living quarters for the interpretive staff.

As originally constructed, visitors entered through a set of metal doors with large windows into a small foyer that provided access to the restrooms on one side and the small multipurpose room on the other. Directly ahead was an "L" shaped interpretive room. The focal point of the room were two large window walls cantilevered out over the foundation and slanted outward as they rose to the ceiling to create an uninterrupted view the Alaska Range as well as majestic Mt. McKinley. Low cushioned benches lined the base of both window walls. The original lighting consisted of metal rimmed recessed ceiling lights. The concrete block walls were painted.

The 1974 expansion drastically altered the exterior and interior of the building. The expansion enlarged the 2,000 square foot footprint of the original building to over 4,500 square feet. Major changes included the construction of a 1025 square foot outdoor viewing pavilion, a 900 square foot wraparound galleria, and a 500 square foot restroom addition to the eastside of the original building. These additions changed the building from a small, rather square building to a long lineal structure, which paralleled the existing gravel parking lot.

The 1974 expansion of Eielson also altered the interior space. The original entrance was modified by the addition of an enclosed arctic entrance at the west end of the galleria. The walls of the new entrance were covered with wood paneling. The entire east wall of the original building was demolished to allow for the expansion of the restrooms and to provide additional exits. As in the original restrooms, the lower half of the walls and the floor were covered with ceramic tile. Protruding glass light fixtures were installed in the new spaces and existing light fixtures were augmented with plastic track lighting.

The new viewing pavilion consisted of a raised square platform situated to the east and south of the original visitor center. Constructed of concrete and concrete block, the pavilion was covered with a flat roof, which was offset to match the projection of the roof over the interpretive room. The base of the shelter provided additional storage and a maintenance room. A wooded railing extended along the walkway and around the pavilion.

With park visitation exceeding one million a year since 1986, Eielson shows the signs of wear and general deterioration. The most noticeable deterioration, however, is where the 1974 addition joins the original structure. Running throughout the building is a large, ever-increasing crack believed to be the result of the slope settlement due to improper construction and aggravated perhaps by seismic forces on the building. The structural deterioration and the 1974 modifications have had an adverse impact on the structural integrity and the original architectural character of the building.

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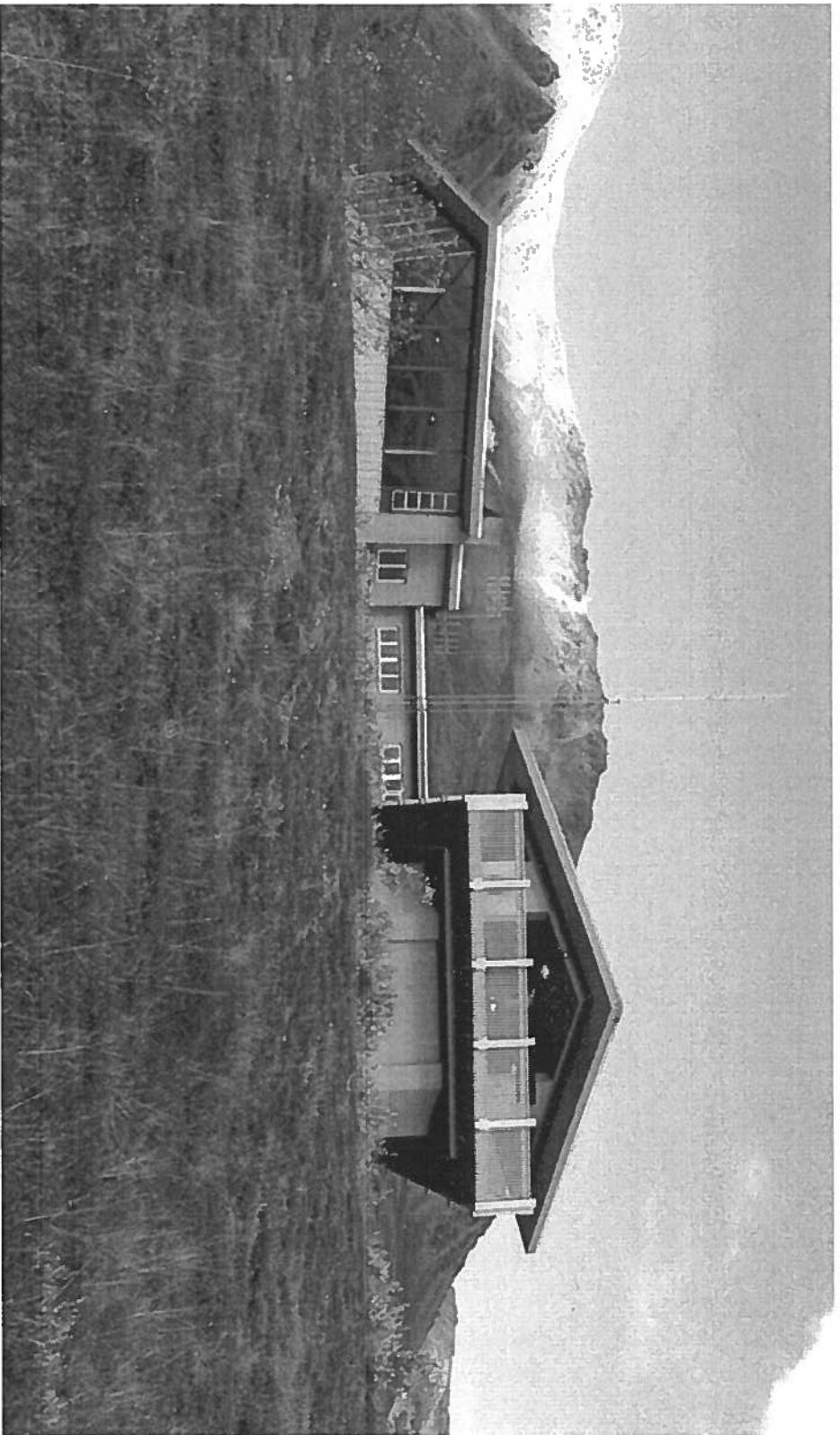
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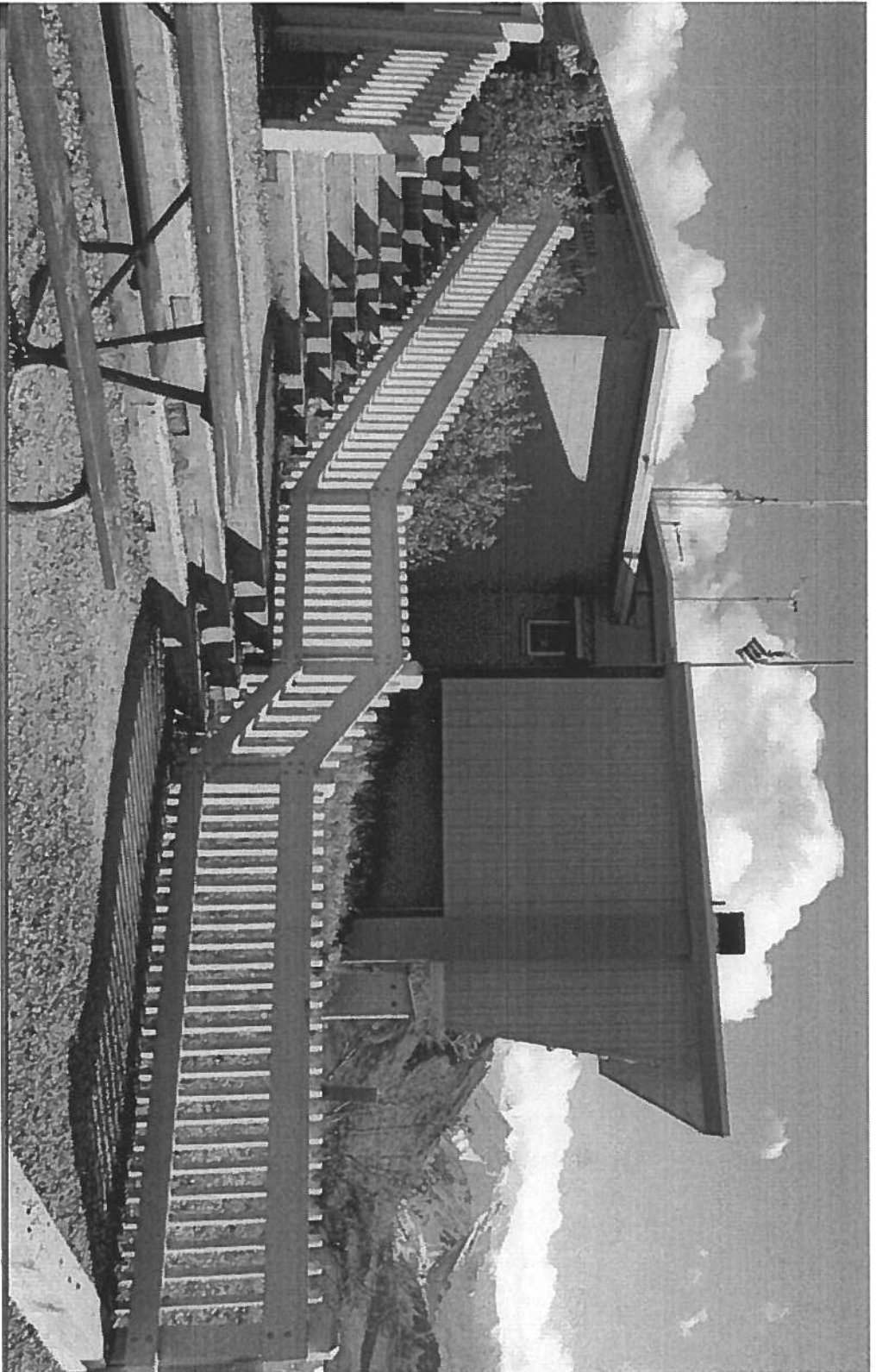
South Elevation
Eielson Visitor Center
Denali National Park and Preserve
1963



South Elevation
Eielson Visitor Center
Denali National Park and Preserve
2001



North Elevation
Eielson Visitor Center
Denali National Park and Preserve
2001



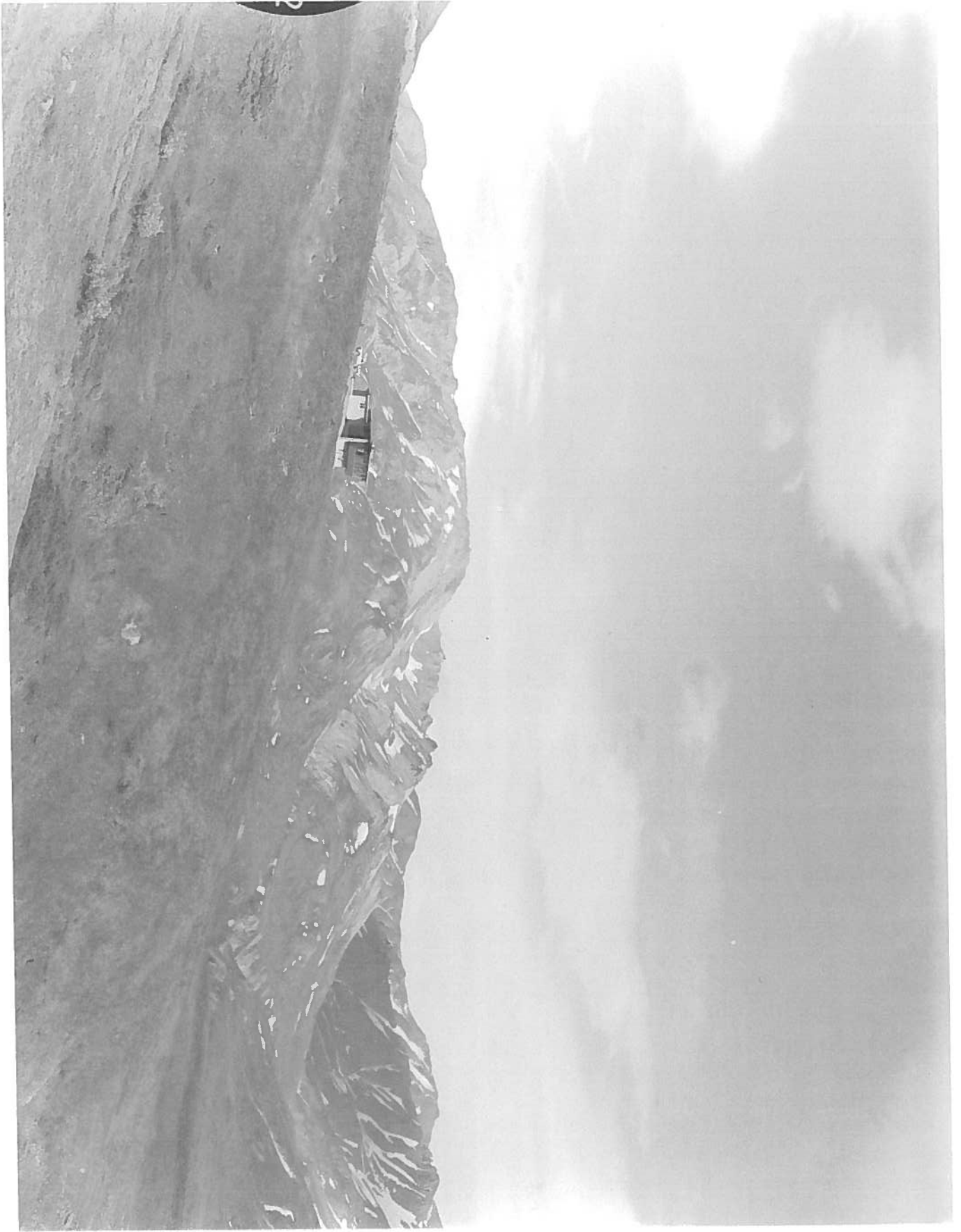
Picnic Area, East Elevation
Eielson Visitor Center
Denali National Park and Preserve
2001



West Elevation
Eielson Visitor Center
Denali National Park and Preserve
2001



East Elevation
Eielson Visitor Center
Denali National Park and Preserve
2001





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