Peer Reviewed

Title: Yosemite of Ice, Yosemite of Fire: A Mythology of Forms [Place Debate: Yosemite National Park - Perceptions]

Journal Issue: Places, 6(3)

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Publication Date: 1990

Publication Info: Places

Permalink: http://escholarship.org/uc/item/87f571qq

Acknowledgements: This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe, visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information, contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords: places, placemaking, architecture, environment, landscape, urban design, public realm, planning, design, Yosemite, mythology, Arthur Krim

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Yosemite of Ice, Yosemite of Fire: A Mythology of Forms

There is an awesome quality about Yosemite Valley, a breathless scale that has been the basis for enduring attraction: the sheer granite cliffs rising so abruptly, the sudden height bowing from a serene floor, the hidden secret of a great space, the sliced shape of the domes.

All these visual, visceral, vital features appear in our minds and pull us into Yosemite for a first timid visit, then again for yet another view of its awesome space. This majestic scale, the specter of nature in grandeur unknown elsewhere in our experience, has given the Valley its magical power.

Not surprisingly, we openly question how this Valley was created. El Capitan and Half Dome beg the imagination of human logic to divine their sharp, vertical, perpendicular, sheer, immense granite forms. The rock itself seems to hold the story of its own creation and speaks to an inner voice of the human spirit. How could such a rock be so pure, so straight, so large, so high and still be of this common earth? How did Yosemite come to be so sheer, so abrupt, so sudden, so sliced? How did such a Valley come to be in place, or out of place, with our natural world? It baffles the mind.

Yosemite of Ice

We are told in official folders, if we ask, in colored brochures, if we read, that the glaciers created Yosemite—great ice flows scraping down from the high Sierra peaks, carving out the Valley below in some distant geologic age of heroic creation.

The Great Glaciers, hypothesized by John Muir in his sojourn of 1867, were first given as the natural force behind Yosemite’s creation. Now we are told the glaciers of John Muir are not the glaciers that carved the Valley. It was during some other ice age, before John Muir’s, before the Pleistocene, before the earliest ice age yet known, that glaciers created the great Valley of Yosemite. Of course, only faint traces of these glaciers remain, we are told, and a careful eye on the high plateau might see this great natural force evident.

We are told, as well, that before the great glaciers carved their “U’s” Yosemite was a valley “V,” a normal valley like others in the Sierra, like Herch Herch or Kings, deep “V” valleys carved by fast flowing streams down from the mountains. As the mountains were rising up, the streams dug deeper into the granite, carving their valley “V’s.”

And before these young valleys there was the molten rock, the
A Mythology of Forms

Today geologists tell us the granite of Yosemite was injected in a rapid event, in a series of sequences creating the Sierra Nevada pluton some hundred million years ago. As it cooled, as it coalesced, as it conglomerated, the granite fractured, cracked and fragmented in joints that created the geometry of its character.

From that point on, in a series of primal events, the form of Yosemite emerged: a crack, a chasm, a gorge, an abyss, split into the great granite boulders. A simple, sodden, shear slicing along the lines of least resistance. It seems simple, it seems obvious, it seems logical, it seems practical to understand Yosemite in this direct granite origin.

Perhaps this too is granite mythology. Perhaps this too is childishly for reasonable thought, and it is easier to say the glacial gey curved Yosemite for our eyes. But what does it matter to the traffic hordes to know anything of how the Valley came to be? The gridlocked roads and overbooked cabins will still be filled beyond capacity in any case.

Knowing granite is to seek the primary force in the Valley; the source of wonder and awe that draws us near, and to respect the great cliffs on their own terms as self-made faces that deserve our humble protection.

There are other meadows in mountain valley streams, other plateaus of high tundra moss, but nowhere else on earth yet known are there such great granite forms so sheer and immense of scale to dwarf human thought. Perhaps on the distant planets, perhaps during some future space probe, we might find such an awesome chasm. But here on earth, it is Yosemite that is the Incorruptible Valley of granite walls and we should understand its unique spirits of Ice and Fire for our own preservation.