

ASPEN'S 20th CENTURY ARCHITECTURE: CHALET STYLE BUILDINGS

When the bottom fell out of the silver mining industry in 1893, Aspenites considered resuscitating the economy by capitalizing on the town's inherent beauty in an effort to attract tourists to the valley. However, it was not until almost 40 years later, at a time when skiing as a recreational sport was beginning to take hold in the United States, that Aspen found its true calling.

Tom Flynn, Billy Fiske, and Ted Ryan were among the first to acknowledge Aspen's potential as a premier ski resort and were the principal investors in the Highland Bavarian Lodge, a Chalet Style structure built in the Castle Creek Valley in 1936. The development of the Highland Bavarian Lodge was the first attempt to emulate European resorts, a trend that would continue for over thirty years (well into the 1960's) as the town tried to prove its legitimacy to tourists, and compete with famous destinations such as St. Mortiz and Chamonix.

The idea of creating a ski area in the United States that mimicked the look and character of European resorts was being discussed by another town at the time as well. Sun Valley, the first destination ski resort in North America, was the brainchild of Averell Harriman, who sought to imitate Swiss and Austrian villages. The Challenger Ski Lodge, built at Sun Valley in 1937, was also modeled after the European Chalet Style. Architect Gilbert Stanley was asked to design "something like a Tyrolean village."¹ Using the imagery of the Alps was considered by some to be important to the success of the new resorts, in effect, subtly suggesting that America's slopes could rival Europe's. Harriman was disappointed with Stanley's initial design, so he then asked Hollywood art director Ernst Fegte to design a Tyrolean façade. The resulting building was painted to resemble a cluster of chalets, and was later used as the set for Claudette Colbert's movie *Swiss Ski Adventure*.²



Highland Bavarian Lodge, built in 1936

The development of the Highland Bavarian Lodge in Aspen was not unlike the example in Sun Valley, albeit on a much smaller scale, and without the Idaho resort's immediate success. The earliest tourism promotions for Aspen appealed to one's sense of adventure and the ruggedness of the Rocky Mountains—boasting of hunting, fishing and seclusion. However, the Lodge's brochure, penned by humorist Robert Benchley in 1936, took on more international flair and stated, "Aspen, Colorado is a place where you can indulge in winter sports without having to get a passport, wrestle with the Atlantic, stop in Paris at the expense of your health, and come all the

¹ Wendolyn Spence Holland, *Sun Valley: An Extraordinary History*, 230.

² Holland, 230.

way back again.”³ Benchley’s brochure for the lodge went on to say “you can have just as good a time falling down there as you can on any of the European slopes.”⁴ Benchley also assured potential clients that the snow in America was as good as any place in Europe. The lodge itself consisted of a dining room and living room heated by a big fireplace, and two double-decker bunkrooms that could accommodate sixteen people.⁵ The building was nestled in a picturesque setting and designed by architect Gordon Kauffman. Jimmy Bodrero, an artist from the Disney Studios, created the decorative motif. (Involvement of individuals from the movie industry with the design elements in both Sun Valley and Aspen suggested the importance, from the outset, of creating a specific European-like mountain “scene” in these emerging ski towns.)

The effort to create a ski area around the Highland Bavarian drew to Aspen the first of the European ski specialists who saw striking similarities in terrain to the Alps. Andre Roch, a Swiss avalanche expert, and Dr. Gunther Langes, an Italian, were hired to spend a year exploring the Aspen area to determine the best location for skiing. The Highland Bavarian Lodge investors sought legitimacy for their project by consulting with the well known Europeans. Roch asserted that the mountains immediately surrounding the town were insufficient, and he and Langes eventually settled on the upper Castle Creek Valley, where the ghost town of Ashcroft is located, and Mt. Hayden rises above the valley. Roch envisioned Ashcroft’s transformation into a Swiss village. Historian Anne Gilbert writes, “Andre Roch had found the perfect place to develop a ski resort. He knew that the Americans in the 1930’s were interested in skiing and they would pay to ski at a resort reminiscent of the Alps.”⁶

The personal records of Ted Ryan included a plan for a Swiss-style village, and series of trams to shuttle skiers up to the top of the surrounding mountains. But the dream of the Swiss village at Ashcroft died with the onset of World War II, and with the death of Billy Fiske, who was killed in action. It was revived for a short time after the War- the vision changed to a new, Hollywood inspired “Wild West” village- but plans were eventually scrapped altogether. The focus of ski resort development in the Roaring Fork Valley shifted, instead, from Castle Creek to Aspen Mountain, where the first “Boat Tow” had been built in 1937 (modeled after those used at Kitzbuhl, Austria), and where Roch had laid out Aspen’s first ski run.

Europe’s stylistic influence on America’s destination resorts went beyond physical layout and design of the buildings, however. Along with technical authorities such as Roch, American resorts recruited top ski instructors from Europe in the 1930’s and 1940’s, which, given the political turmoil of Europe, proved less than difficult. In fact, all of Sun Valley’s first instructors were Austrian, and wore Tyrolean uniforms.

Many of the same ski instructors later joined the 10th Mountain Division, an elite mountaineering division of the United States Army, which led to their discovery of Aspen on weekend leaves from the training base at Camp Hale (near Leadville). After the war, many veterans returned to the area, among them Friedl Pfeifer, a talented and well-known skier from

³ Robert Benchley, “How to Aspen,” 1936.

⁴ Benchley

⁵ Anne Gilbert, *Re-creation Through Recreation: Aspen Skiing from 1870 to 1970*, 17.

⁶ Gilbert, 22.

St. Anton, Austria. Pfeifer had run the Tyrolean influenced ski school at Sun Valley prior to the War, but moved to Aspen at the end of the War to help create a resort in the area that reminded him most of home. In his memoirs, Nice Goin': My Life on Skis, Pfeifer recalls his first impression of Aspen: "The mountain peaks looming over the town made me feel like I was returning to St. Anton."⁷



Elli's of Aspen

The Aspen Skiing Corporation, which Pfeifer co-founded in 1946 with Walter Paepcke, differed fundamentally in its design philosophy from Sun Valley, primarily due to the direction of Chicago industrialist Walter Paepcke, and artist Herbert Bayer, who was the architect of many of the first Ski Company's first buildings. The Bauhaus style favored by these men did not lend itself to the design of chalets. Nevertheless, Pfeifer's association with Aspen helped to give it an international flair, which attracted a number of Europeans to move here after the war.

Several of these individuals, including Fred and Elli Iselin, opened small businesses in town and applied the Chalet influences reminiscent of their hometowns to their buildings. Businesses such as Epicure, served up European pastries. Elli's of Aspen sold fine European ski clothing, located in a Victorian building across from the Hotel Jerome for four decades, and quickly established Aspen as a sophisticated ski town. Elli's façade was decorated with ski figures and edelweiss, again reinforcing the Tyrolean influence in Aspen. Similarly, according to a 1954 *Aspen Times* article, The Little Nell Cafe, a modest log cabin located slope side on Aspen Mountain, was decorated with a coat of arms representing the states of Switzerland.⁸ The owner, a Swiss immigrant, was honoring his homeland with the designs on the exterior façade. Additionally, of course, lodges were the building type that employed the Chalet style most commonly, and even residents who were not recently immigrated from Europe incorporated the style into their properties.



The Prospector Lodge, 301 E. Hyman Avenue, built in 1947, since demolished and replaced

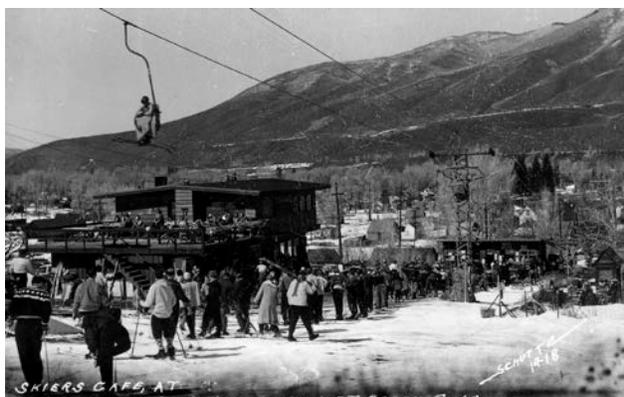
⁷ Friedl Pfeifer, My Life on Skis, 111.

⁸ *Aspen Times*, January 14, 1954, 4.

Comparisons to European ski resorts were also evident in advertising. Sun Valley's brochures boasted of Austrian ski instructors and appealed to elite visitors who traveled both by train and plane. The Aspen Chamber of Commerce's advertising throughout the 1950's and 1960's had this character as well. In a brochure promoting lodging and accommodations, the Norway Lodge notes "the intimacy and charm of an old world inn, at Aspen's No. 1 chairlift."⁹ In the same brochure the Skiers Chalet and Steak House and Edelweiss also emphasize their "chalet" accommodations. In a multi-page pamphlet, entitled "Aspen, Wonderful Ski Town,"



The Norway Lodge, built in 1954



Skier's Chalet, 710 S. Aspen Street, built in 1955

created by the Chamber, there are several passages that emphasize Aspen as an international resort with a European flavor. "In fact," the brochure states on the opening page, "Aspen knows few rivals. No European resort today can advertise a larger, more elaborate, more luxurious ski village right at the foot of the slopes."¹⁰ Several pages later, when discussing Aspen's nightlife, the brochure claims, "It has been said that Aspen's reputation as a ski-and-fun town rivals, indeed overshadows, that of the most celebrated European ski resorts."¹¹



Mountain Chalet, built in 1958

Perhaps "Aspen, Wonderful Ski Town" best summarized Aspen's 1950's international design character: "Modern Aspen is a study in architectural contrasts, ranging from Swiss baroque to contemporary American."¹² Promoting Aspen's varied architectural styles further emphasizes the importance and influence of the Chalet style in our town's history. Unlike Vail (which created a later Hollywood "scene" as a Tyrolean village) the early Western American ski resort towns like Sun Valley and Aspen were an eclectic mix of Chalets, Rustic Style buildings, and Victorian structures from the 19th and early 20th century mining and ranching days. Fortunately for Aspen, Chalet Style buildings from the post-War period still exist today. The lodges,

⁹"Lodging and Accommodations" brochure, Written Material File: Tourism 1950s and 1960s, HeritageAspen Archives.

¹⁰ *Aspen, Wonderful Ski Town*, Pamphlet, Written Material File: Tourism 1950s and 1960s, HeritageAspen Archives.

¹¹ *Aspen, Wonderful Ski Town*, 12

¹² *Aspen, Wonderful Ski Town*, 21

many of which still personify European warmth and hospitality, exemplify the social and architectural history of the community as it began developing into an international ski resort.

Who knew that in 1936, the Highland Bavarian Lodge, the only structure built in Aspen in the wake of the Silver Crash in 1893, would influence a design period in which an imported style would take hold? Aspen's post-War Chalet Style lodges included The Prospector (built in 1947, and since demolished), the Norway Lodge (1954), Skier's Chalet (1955), the Holland House (1956), and Mountain Chalet (1958). Guido's Restaurant (1951) was the best example of a downtown building in the Chalet style, but unfortunately, was demolished before the style could be recognized as an important part of our heritage. Classic examples of the style built as residences well into the 1960's, also still remain.



949 W. Smuggler Street, built in 1946

Eligibility Considerations

There are specific physical features that a property must possess in order for it to reflect the significance of the historic context. The characteristics of the Chalet Style, whose origins in Europe date from the 1700's, include: moderately shallow roof pitches, horizontal design elements, prominent wood balconies with cut-out railings, and decorative bargeboard trim. Delicate painted details are sometimes found on the bargeboards, and on wall surfaces. Sometimes the buildings will have applied half timbering. The best of Aspen's remaining examples of this important style exemplify these classic features.



Cresta Haus, East Cooper Avenue, since altered

Paint color also plays an important role in this style. Typically, the body of the building is dark brown, and trim is painted in a light color, or the reverse; white walls with dark stained or painted trim. Primary exterior materials are stucco and wood.

To be eligible for historic designation, a chalet style building in Aspen should exhibit the following distinctive characteristics:

- A large singular roof form, generally low in slope, with the ridge running along the short dimension of the structure. This roof usually covers the entire structure without interruption. The eave of the roof usually comes down to a low plate height at the upper level of the

structure. In some residential structures, the upper level only exists under the roof structure with no side walls.

- Deep overhangs with the structure of the roof expressed on the underside, eaves and rakes decorated with cutouts and fretwork bargeboards. The peak is generally highlighted by a larger decorative element hanging downward.
- The footprint of the building is usually rectangular with few deviations from that geometry as the structures go up.
- Continuous porches running the circumference of the structure, or at least the length of the primary side.
- Decorative elements, usually two dimensional, such as balustrades of vertical boards spaced apart having cutouts providing both a positive and negative shape. Shapes are generally hearts, edelweiss, snowflakes, or other decorative themes from nature.
- The structures usually sit on a white stucco base, up to the second floor. This base may have vertical or battered walls. Openings in this area are generally minimal, with wood lintels.
- Above the stucco base, vertical siding extends to the roof line. The edge of the siding against the stucco base is usually decorative as well. Vertically staggering the siding creates a scalloped edge. At times, the floor structure extends through the wall with decorative ends engaging the stucco.
- Windows are generally horizontally proportioned and are used sparingly. They are sliders or casements, with a center mullion. Shutters and flower boxes are used to decorate the window openings. These elements have similar detailing to the balustrades.
- Colors are restricted to the white of the stucco base, the dark brown of the wood walls, eaves, balustrades, etc. Bright colors are used sparingly to accent the eaves and balustrades and other decorative elements. Murals and painted decorative details are sometimes found on the stucco surface.

The period of historic significance for this style, which is a term used to define the time span during which the style gained architectural, historical, or geographical importance, can be defined as approximately 1946 to the mid 1960's. After that, the connection to the character-defining features described seems to break down. The decoration is toned down considerably, and the upper floors are not clad in wood siding. Similarly, the examples of chalet structures that have been built recently, which are relatively few in number, employ a more eclectic combination of details and architectural features inconsistent with the earlier examples discussed in this paper.



Base of Aspen Mountain



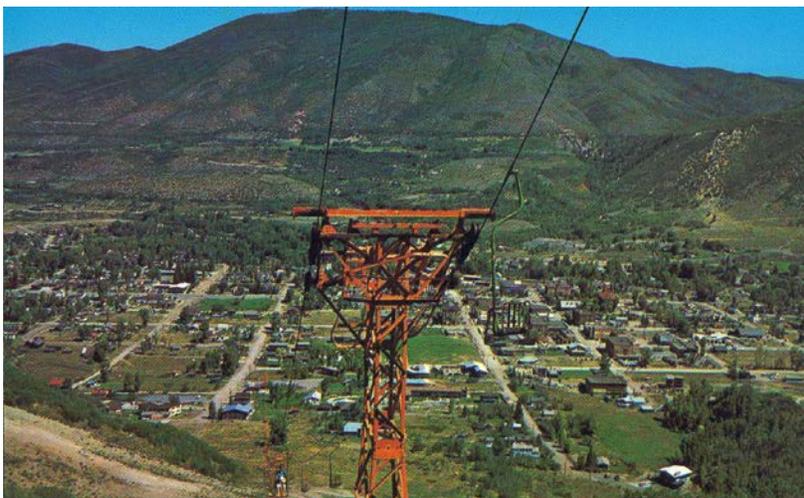
Guido's Restaurant



Guido's- Interior



Mountain Chalet



Lift 1

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