



Duck Creek 003



Duck Creek 004



Duck Creek 005



Duck Creek 006



Duck Creek 007



Duck Creek 008



Duck Creek 009



Duck Creek 010



Duck Creek 011



Duck Creek 012



Duck Creek 013



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Duck Creek 027



Duck Creek 028



Duck Creek 029



Duck Creek 030



Duck Creek 031



Duck Creek 032



Duck Creek 033



Duck Creek 034

# THIRTYFOUR CAMPGROUNDS

Martin Hogue



Duck Creek 039



Duck Creek 040



Duck Creek 041



Duck Creek 042



Duck Creek 043



Duck Creek 044



Duck Creek 045



Duck Creek 046



Duck Creek 047



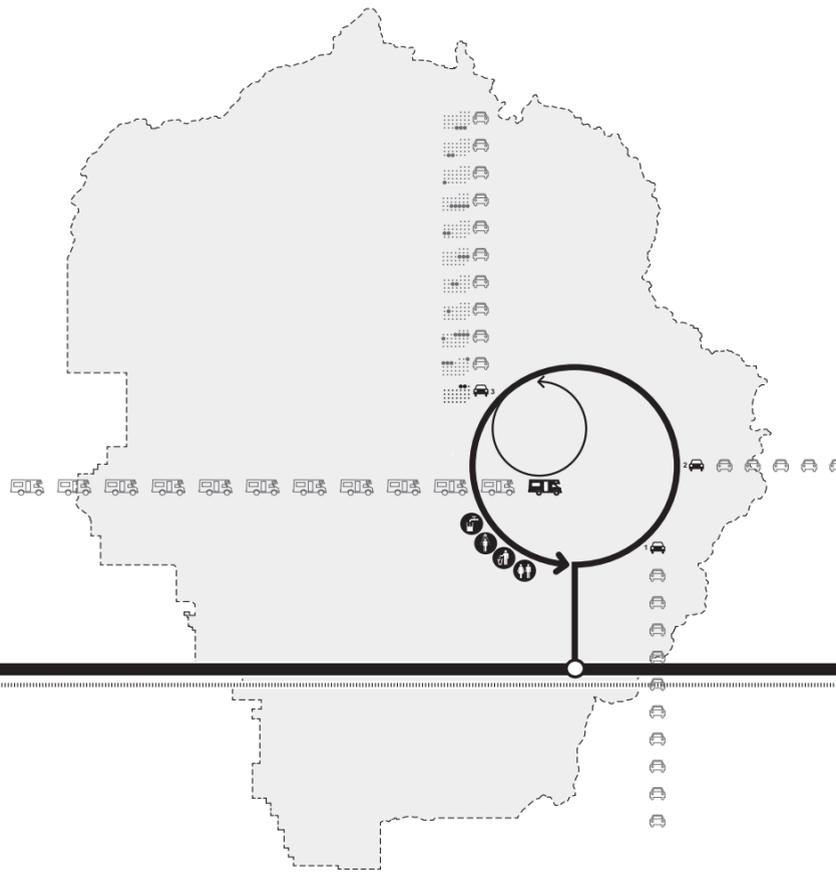
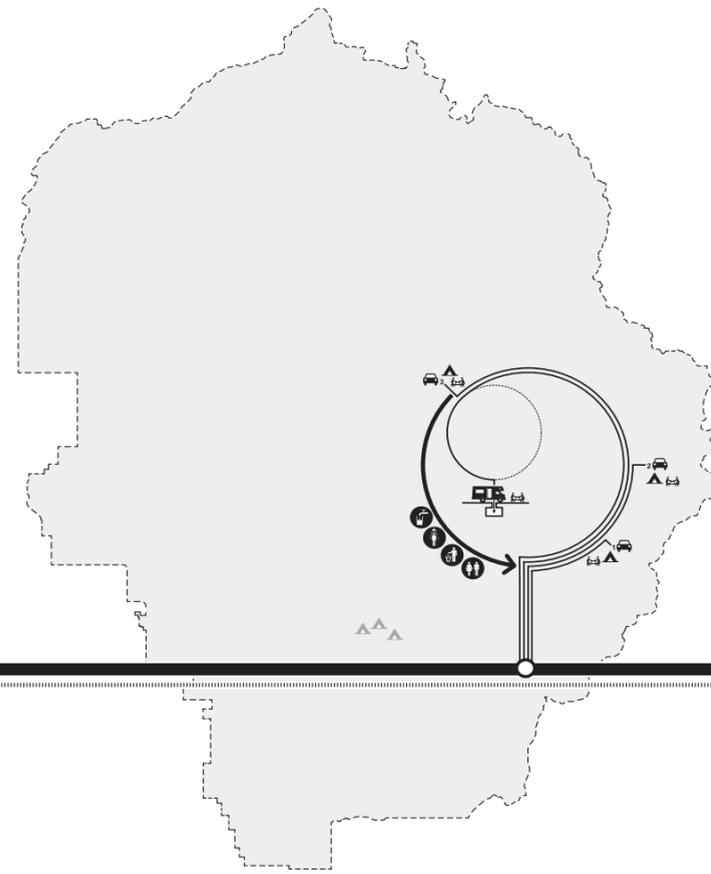
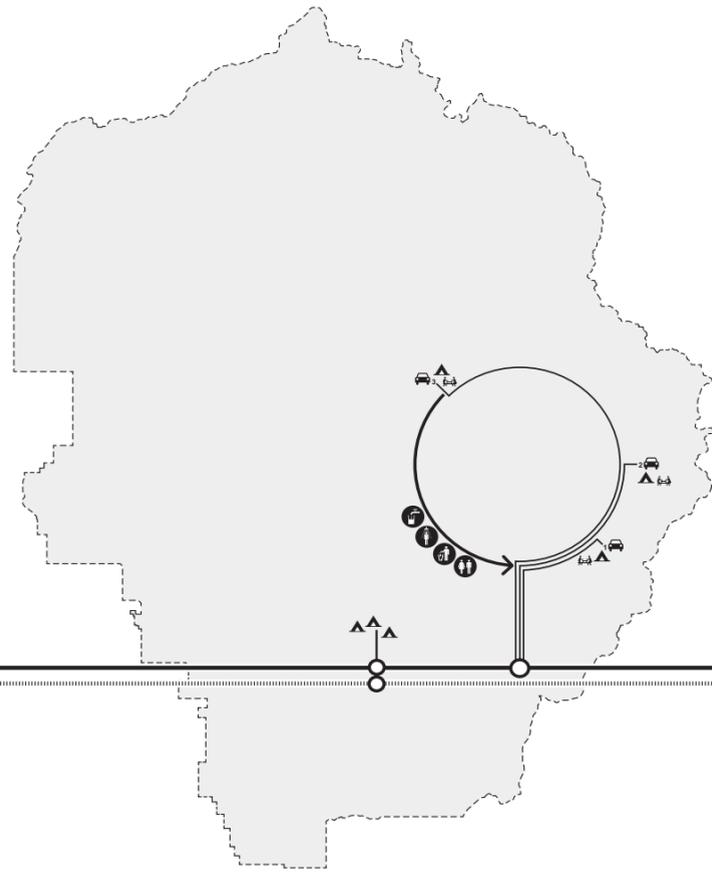
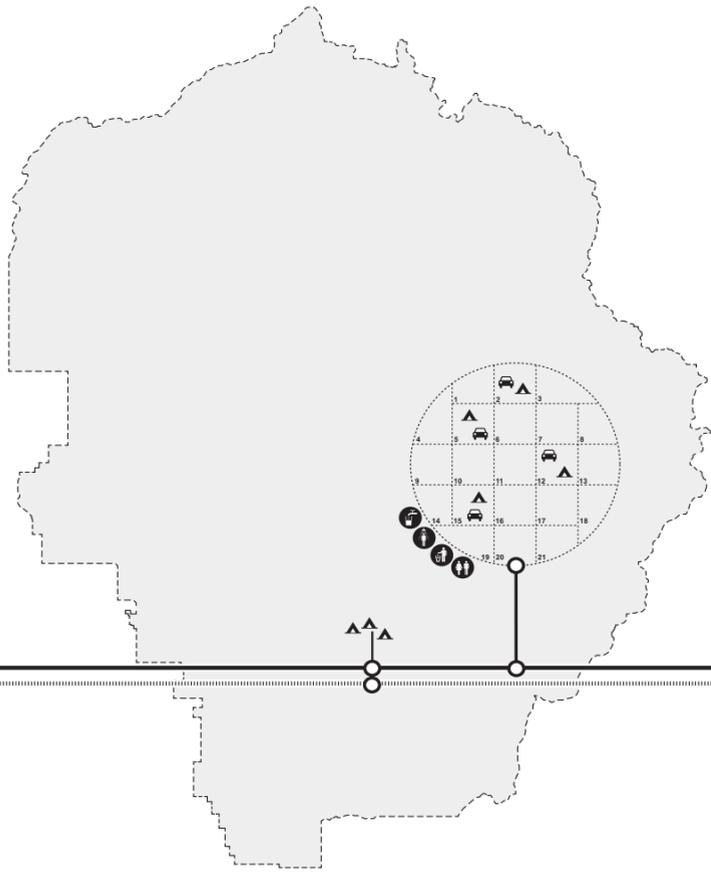
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Duck Creek 049



Duck Creek 050



*One does not impose, but rather expose the site.*

Robert Smithson<sup>1</sup>

There is a satisfying immediacy about the prospect of establishing an encampment for the night—clearing the site, erecting the tent, chopping wood, building a fire, and cooking over the live flame—that in turn suggests a meaningful connection to landscape, place, and the rugged life of backwoods adventurers. At its essence camping is an act of faith and survival, a way to buttress an isolated human settlement against the forces of nature. Situated “somewhere between challenging new circumstances and the safe reassurances of familiarity,” the camp is a temporary substitute for the home—a place to dwell, to sleep, to interact socially, to prepare and eat food.<sup>2</sup> Stripped of any but the most vital conveniences, the camp is literally and figuratively *open* to the stimuli of its natural surroundings.

Each summer millions of Americans will take to the road in search of this powerful experience of nature. Campgrounds all across the country commodify the locus of this singular experience into multiple *sites*. That parcel of land upon which most will elect to park their car, trailer, camper, or RV is thus not only an imagined ideal: there are currently over 900,000 campsites across the country.<sup>3</sup> In 2010, Kampgrounds of America—KOA, familiarly—alone reported a total consumption of over five million campsite-nights, as well as 1.5 million hits monthly on its website.<sup>4</sup> Walmart’s decision 10 year ago to open its parking lots nationally to overnighting RVers free of charge indicates a further and potentially radical devaluation of the traditional campsite. With its only goal being to attract new customers, Walmart’s decision created—*overnight*—a new campground network with thousands of informal facilities that could rival camping giants like KOA.<sup>5</sup> Still, demand for sites remains very high, as evidenced by would-be campers turning to Craigslist to purchase campsite usage at Yosemite National Park during busy holiday weekends at three or four times their original price.<sup>6</sup> Further, the record sales reported by sporting utility stores like REI and EMS owe largely to the retailers’ successful efforts to associate their equipment with the out-of-doors and the prospect of healthy living. For many urbanites, high-performance gear like hiking boots and mountaineering vests have even become staples of everyday casual chic.

Modern campgrounds are replete with delightful irony. Each “lone” campsite functions as a stage upon which cultural fantasies can be performed in full view of an audience of fellow campers interested in much the same “wilderness” experience. For the artist Robert Smithson (1938–1973), whose sensitivities to *site* and *site-making* were informed by the childhood family camping trips he helped organize, the campsite was where one could reenact the *making of a place*.<sup>7</sup> Who in the camping community has not experienced a degree of gear envy at the sight, at a neighboring campsite, of a brand new Primus Gravity II EasyFuel stove (with piezo ignition), a Sierra Designs tent, or a Marmot sleeping bag? KOA even leases some permanently parked Airstream trailers, which allow campers to spend the night in a cultural icon;<sup>8</sup> this experiment lets would-be campers to show up without *any* personal equipment, just as they would at a roadside motel. No longer an expression of the physical labor that its occupants had invested in its construction, the campsite is defined by the consumption that takes place within it. No wonder that the daily repetition of chores once associated with survival has now been so fully recast as



Right: Open camp in Adirondacks, circa 1890. Courtesy of the Adirondacks Museum.  
Next pages: Bruce Davidson, Camp Ground no. 4. Yosemite National Park (1966). © Bruce Davidson/Magnum Photos.

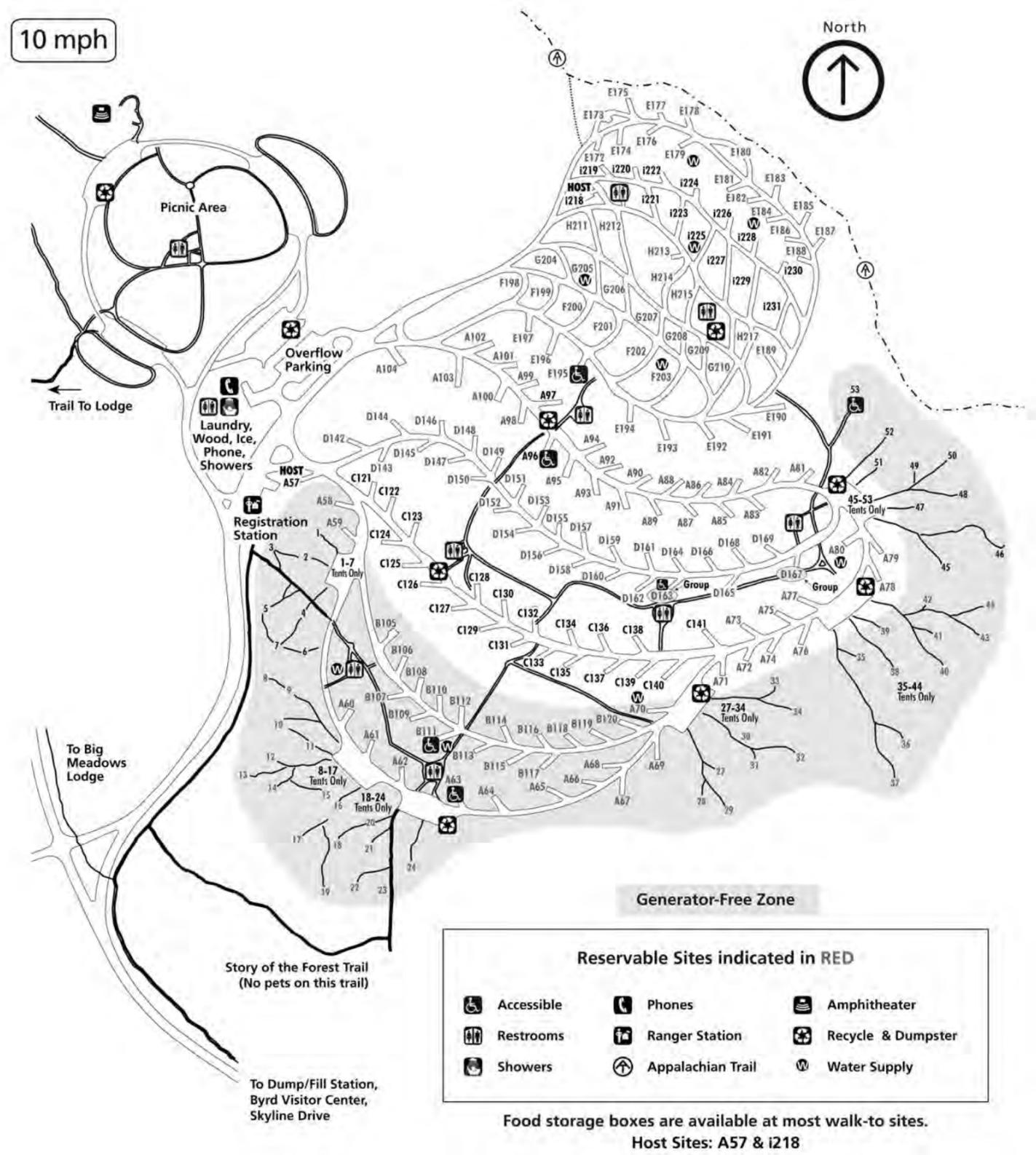


a series of almost spiritual rituals intended to reconnect the camper with what has been largely lost; for by now most of the old necessities—hiking to and clearing the site, hunting for game, collecting water and firewood—have given way to less arduous activities such as parking the car, pitching cable-free pop tents, buying cold cuts at the campground store, hooking up electrical and sewerage conduits, setting up patio chairs, etc. Serviced by networks of infrastructure and populated with trailers and \$300,000 RVs, campgrounds celebrate a unique form of American ingenuity in which intersecting narratives and desires (wilderness, individuality, access, speed, comfort, nostalgia, profit) find themselves strangely and powerfully hybridized.

First pioneered in the Adirondacks, the American recreational campsite could not remain the sole province of its original occupants for long: chief among early camping innovations is the idea that hundreds of campers could occupy the very same site in a single season, with each in fact remaining unknown to the others. To preserve the carefully staged illusion of discovering and dwelling in the wilderness, the modern campsite must function as a perpetually unfinished site, provisionally completed each time a new visitor checks in.<sup>9</sup> The delicate balance between the physical clearing of trees and ground vegetation with the relative *absence* of fixed infrastructural components beyond picnic tables and fire pits creates a persuasive sense of rusticity. The loosely domesticated site requires the participation of campers who, importing their own equipment—tent, food, sleeping bags—make its inhabitation possible. By later taking care to pack up all belongings and remove all waste, each group fulfills the final ritual of camping while also unintentionally *preparing the site* for the next occupant. This unending cycle allows each group of travelers the feeling that they have discovered a site and participated in its construction by temporarily *staking claim* to it for the night.

In the early days of large-scale, organized campgrounds during the 1920s, the only way one could lay claim to such a site was to do so in person, on a first come, first served basis: occupied sites were deemed busy until they were vacated, while unoccupied sites were free to be claimed by the next visitor. Nowadays, even unoccupied sites are subject to market demands and pressures. Before the car or RV is even parked at the site, before the supplies are unloaded, crucial events may have in fact already occurred: some visitors may have reserved their campsite days, weeks, or even months in advance using an online reservation system like [reserveamerica.com](http://reserveamerica.com), [koa.com](http://koa.com), or [recreation.gov](http://recreation.gov); others probably have called the campground from the road hours earlier to secure a spot; these and all other incoming campers will have likely met one-on-one with a helpful attendant at the campground entrance, exchanged perfunctory information (camper's name, address, license plate number, credit card information), and received a parking pass and a facilities map denoting the precise location of their campsite. The map is at once the universal description of the territory of the campground—dozens, or even hundreds of individual campsites appear on it—as well as an indicator of one's exact place within it. If for the campground manager the map provides a degree of spatial order, then for online operators like [reserveamerica.com](http://reserveamerica.com), camping trips function as specific data points in the complex, real-time choreography of arrivals and departures: Mr. and Mrs. B, a party of four originating from the state of Kansas, and who are first-time visitors to the area, arrive on Monday the 7th, they choose site 11, loop B, for a

Big Meadows campground, Shenandoah National Park, from between 1916 and 1925. Courtesy of the National Park Service.

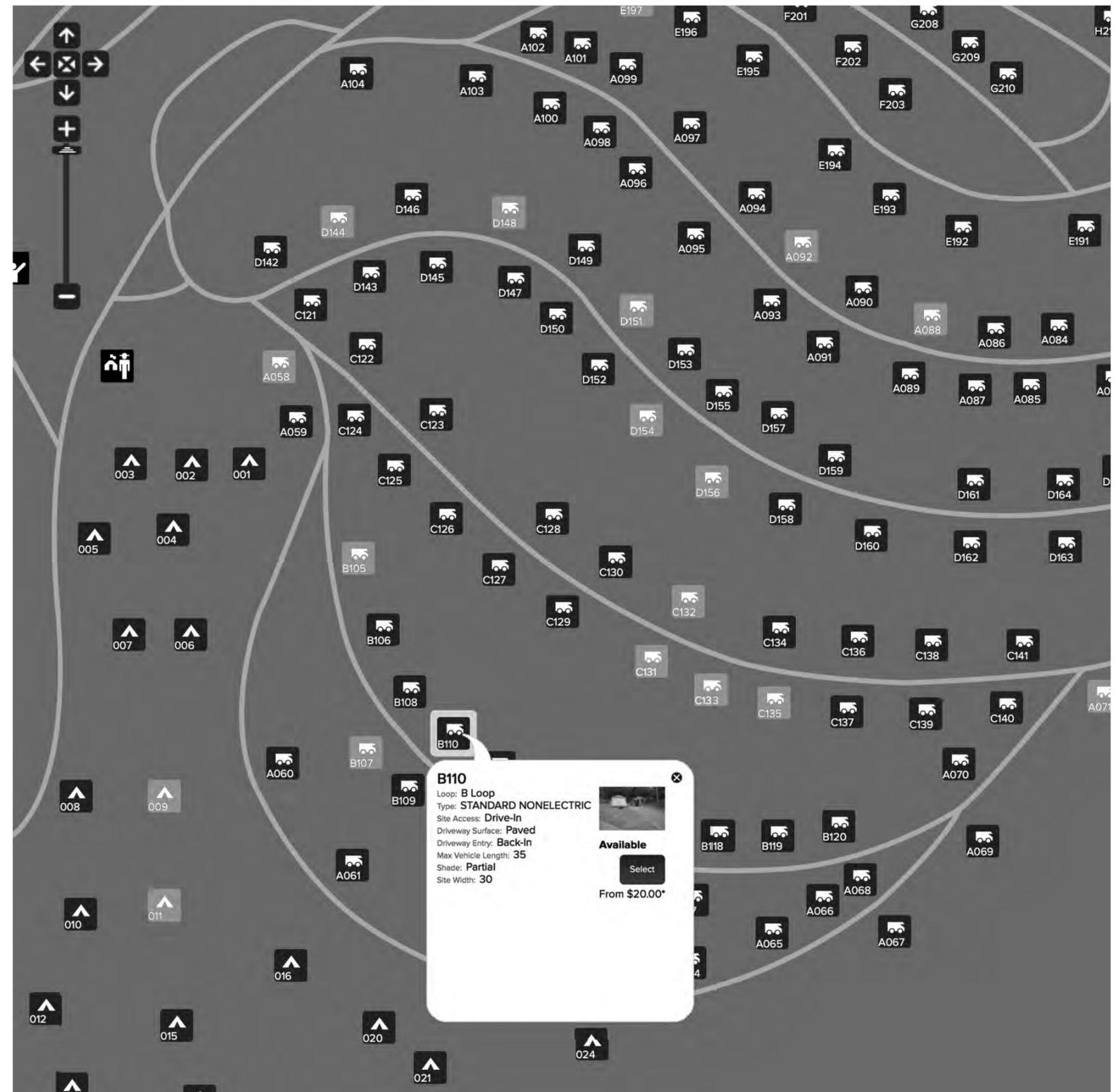


duration of three nights, they have two tents and one vehicle; while Mr. C, party of one from Pennsylvania, is setting camp at site 23, loop C, for a period of seven nights. This meticulous record-keeping is matched only by the extraordinary quantity of information at the hands of the prospective camper: individually documented sites (often featuring photographs, an inventory of services available, seasonal rates, etc.) function as their own autonomous domain, independent of the larger campground. With this wealth of information in hand, the prospective camper is encouraged to comparison shop (sometimes across multiple campgrounds at once), seeking in the intricacy of each description a possible advantage: *is site 97 more private than site 98?*

Offering a textured photographic survey culled from vast quantities of available Internet camping data, this book examines the nature of the contemporary campground as a key setting in the American landscape. Ed Ruscha's classic *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (1967) provides a conceptual framework for the project. I was first drawn to the book for its title. At once straightforward and clever, Ruscha delivers nothing less than what he promises on the cover: images of 34 parking lots in and around the Los Angeles area. *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* is characteristic of Ruscha's mechanical approach to photography throughout the 1960s, as well as his fascination with the automobile-dominated landscapes of the strip, the suburb, and the highway. Other Ruscha works with titles like *Twentysix Gas Stations* and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* deliver on the same promise: Ruscha's style is detached, serial, impersonal, as if he himself were merely an intermediary in the process of documenting these places. In *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, the artist approached each of the prospective sites from the air, capturing a moment in time when each facility was completely empty of cars. Under Ruscha's gaze, the parking lots appear even more immense than their capacity suggests. The absence of cars suggests that they can all be compared in somewhat even terms—as flat, expansive asphalt surfaces. The full impact of the piece comes in the repetition of the same approach over a range of locations across the city. Each lot is both different (location, shape, capacity, etc.) from, but also fundamentally the same as, the others. The reader can easily imagine occupying any of the lots with their own vehicle. Like Ruscha, I was intrigued by the idea that 34 campgrounds, like 34 parking lots or 26 gas stations, could seem like so few and yet so many at the same time.

Does the title suggest that campsites are merely parking spaces for tents and RVs? The comparison is apt at least in some regards: like parking lots, campgrounds are laid out primarily with a high level of efficiency (capacity, circulation) in mind. With large vehicles constantly moving in and out, it's hardly surprising that parking and campground designs employ similar arrangements of easy pull-in and pull-out slots, connected to one-way circulation lanes. It's also true that cars, RVs, trailers, and even tents occupy unique, designated places within the spatial arrangement of the campground: all are literally *parked*—at least temporarily—at pre-established locations.

I was interested in pushing Ruscha's impersonal approach, his *apparent* lack of agency in the work, one step further: instead of visiting and photographing these campgrounds myself, why not simply rely on the wide database of individual site descriptions available in recreation.gov,<sup>10</sup> koa.com, or reserveamerica.com?<sup>11</sup> I was interested in seeing how these



Big Meadows campground as seen on reserveamerica.com on December 1, 2015. Websites like reserveamerica.com and recreation.gov provide detailed information for individual campsites at the click of a mouse, including photographs, pricing, and infrastructural amenities. Courtesy of Active Network LLC.

landscapes were being experienced from the perspective of the camper/ shopper: many of these campgrounds (though not yet all) feature photos of individual campsites that can be easily browsed. Clicking away on the Internet, dropping in and out of individual sites with breathtaking speed, I myself was able to visit hundreds of campgrounds and often thousands of individual campsites in a single seating.<sup>12</sup> Could this kind of travel—while highly abstract—yield new insights?

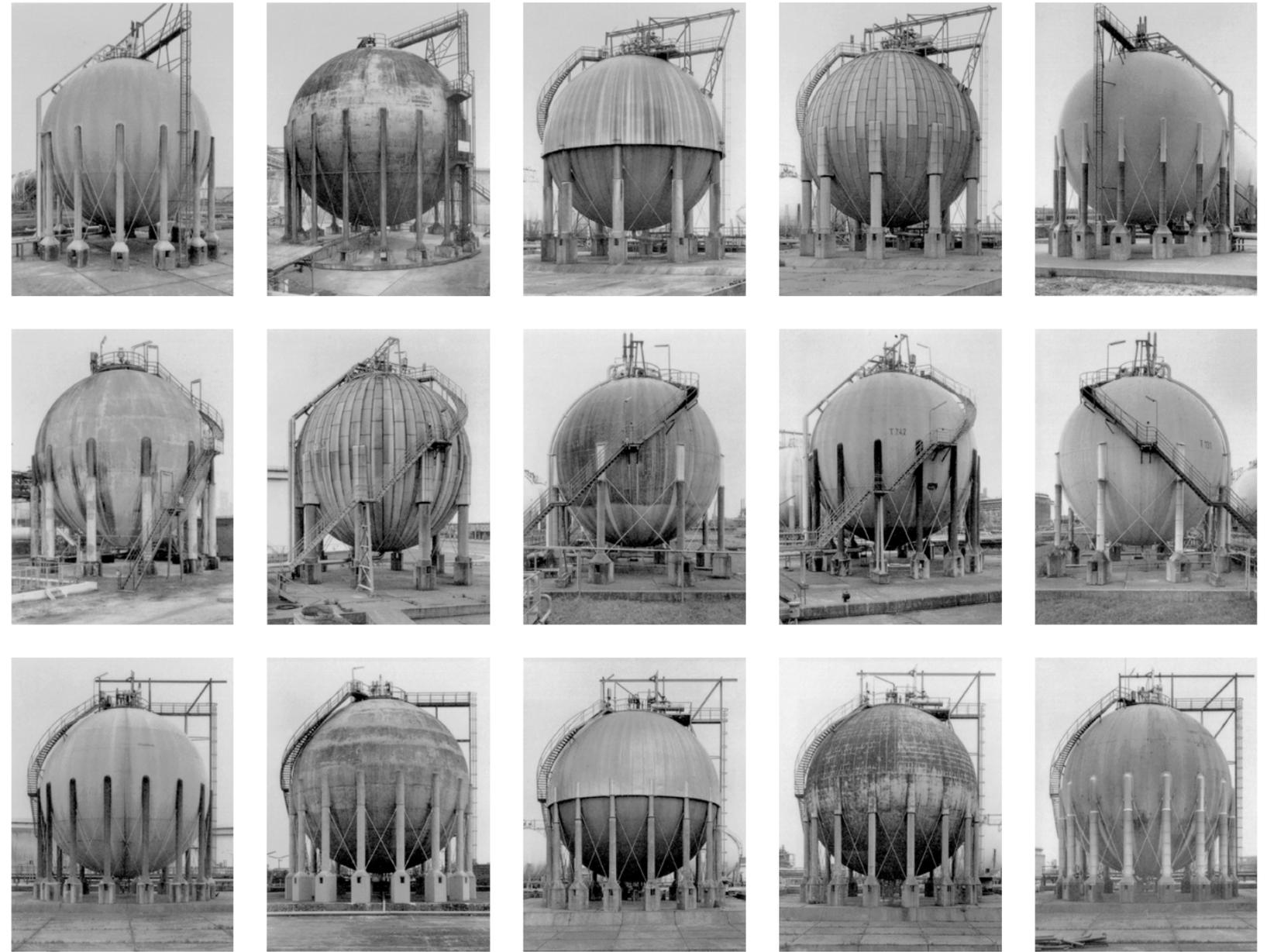
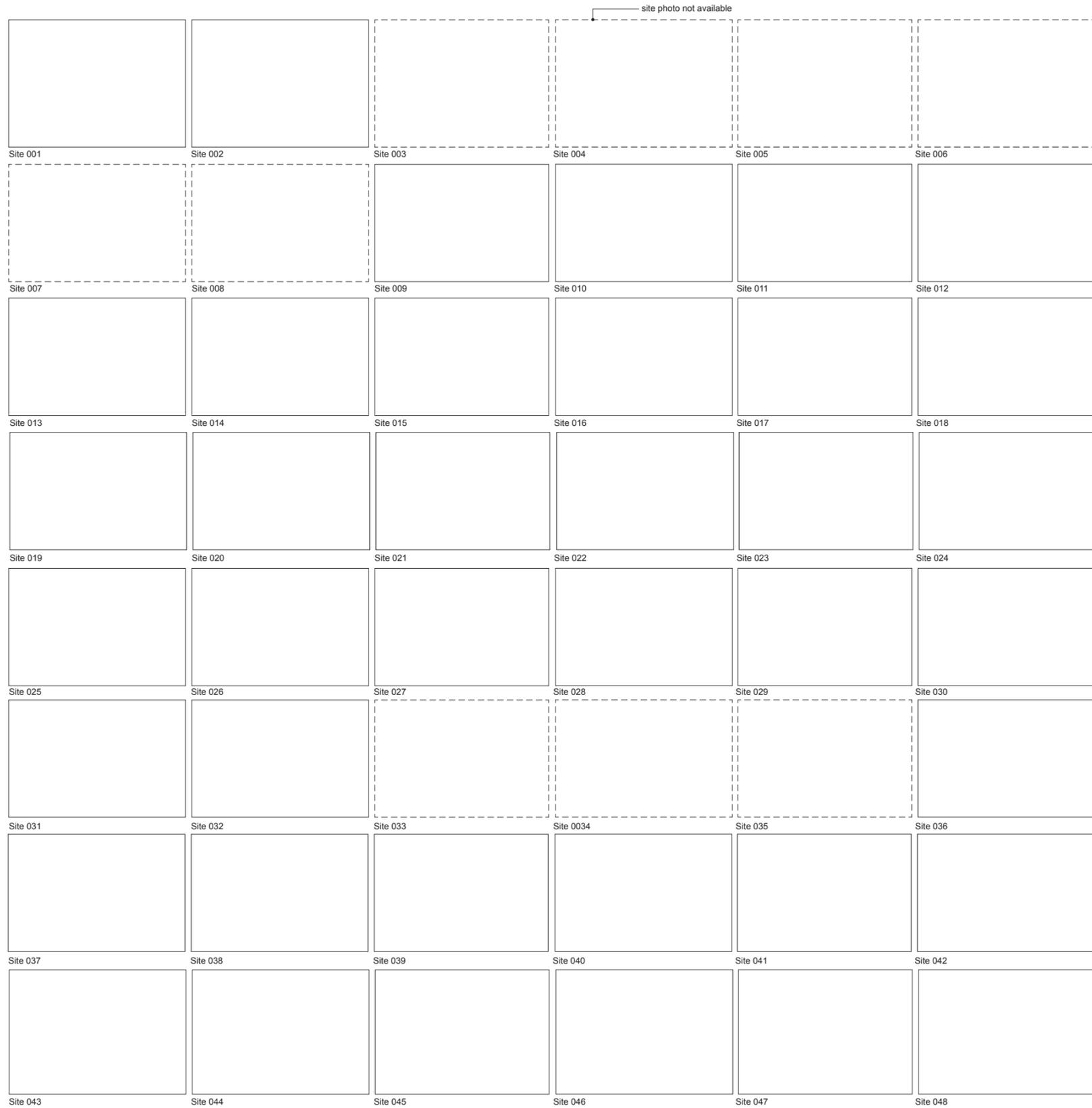
Not surprisingly, perhaps, the individual campsite images are more often than not woefully impersonal, low resolution, inert, and dull. And why should we expect otherwise? The role of each photograph is not to capture the broader context of the campground but to document the campsite as a piece of real estate—a generic setting of utilities. To add suggestive quality, the National Park Service tends to favor occupied photographs of their campsites. Shot at a distance, the goal is never to show actual campers, but to further the potential of the original image by furnishing the site with real occupants, vehicles, and equipment: *that tent or that truck could be mine*. State facilities on the other hand are generally shown empty of occupants, which directly focuses the reader on the limited infrastructure present on the site: the open clearing, the gravel parking strip, the fire pit, the picnic table, the identification signage, etc. In many regards it's fascinating that campers *could* make enlightened decisions about their encampment based on these photos. There are at once too many of them, and yet not enough to convey true meaning.

Perhaps equally strange to the self-imposed assignment of consuming these images in large numbers is the task of the individual(s) who took these photos in the first place.<sup>13</sup> The reader can almost imagine a dedicated attendant moving patiently across the campground, taking care to record each and every site, labeling images to correspond to specific numbers on the map. Each image is at once a unique record of a specific site and yet, because each image is also almost identical to others taken in the same area, it's often difficult to distinguish one campsite from the next. There is no sense in hiding that within the undifferentiated landscape of the American campground, it is difficult to produce images that don't end up looking the same.<sup>14</sup> Did the campground attendant, like Ruscha, wait for each campsite to be vacated before a proper photo could be taken? Is this general lack of occupation a result or a goal? Is the camper stationed at site 079 really the lone occupant of the Bruneau Dunes State Park campground?

Approaching the individual images as a broader whole—as if they were the stills in a movie, following in the footsteps of the original photographer—the reader experiences something altogether different: repetition makes way for subtle difference. Textures of soil, shrubs, and foliage are revealed; at times, even broad landscape features take shape in the background (see site B018c in Zion National Park's Watchman campground, for example). Time and light (the passing clouds over Steamboat Lake State Park campground, the last photograph taken in semi-darkness at Mississinewa Lake's site 151, or the unexpected blinding light at site 216 in Seven Points campground), changing weather conditions (the sudden rain storm beginning at Fort Steven's site N006), and even seasonal changes unfold dramatically over the duration of the original photographic assignment (experience the fall leaves at Peninsula State campground's site 700 or the light snowfall at site 124 in Grand Canyon

Ed Ruscha, *Universal Studios, Universal City*. From *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (1967). © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Art Alanis.





Left: proposed image grid format for campsite images.  
 Above: Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Gas Tanks* (1983–1992). Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York. © Bernd and Hilla Becher.

National Park's Mather campground or Big Meadows' A101 covered in snow in an otherwise sunny summer set of photos). By looking in between the exposures, as it were, a new reality begins to take shape.

Within these thousands of anonymous photographs, unique design features and individual sites of interest abound: the crisply delineated tent pad at Elkmont A015 or Ridgway 230; the oval concrete picnic area at Ridgway 068; the roofed picnic tables at Lakeside B009 and Bruneau Dunes 021; the fence guarding the edge of Moon Lake's site 030; the bear-proof food boxes at Yosemite National Park's Upper Pines' site 058 (fairly common throughout the American West); the strange, hooking pole adjacent the picnic table at Island Park's site 048; the nearby bathrooms at Fort Stevens' site C044; the retaining walls at Seven Points site 178; or the nearly erased walk-in sites at Assateague National seashore. And what to make of the strange structure hovering over Mississinewa Lake State Park's site 091?

In the world of online camping reservations, the site—not the campground as a whole—has become the sole unit of management. Thousands of “units” are browsed, reserved, or cancelled in real time. In fact, there is *enough* data available here to attempt the task of recovering each of these 34 campgrounds, but the data had to be patiently reconstituted and given a new graphic framework. The neutral, systematic arrangement of images in this volume owes much to Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographic oeuvre: each image represents a single campsite, which was downloaded from one of the sources discussed earlier. Each image is the same size, no matter the physical size of the original campsite (a tent site being smaller than an RV site, or a group site, for example). The images are arranged in ascending chronological order by site number, which appears below each image. These annotations serve two important purposes: first, to lay bare the administrative foundation of the campground, its coordinate system of driving loops and addresses (*Assateague Bayside 2.033; Cheney M+M Point 029; Watchman loop D, 007; Oh! Ridge 017, Bear loop*). These annotations function as placeholders in the cases when individual images were not available. Second, functioning as a generic map, the grid becomes a measuring system for the campground's physical size (1 page, 11 pages), with unexplained discontinuities (Mississinewa Lake offers 403 sites, numbered 1 through 470) glossed over. To further the sense of placelessness within the grid system, campgrounds are labeled by zipcode and arranged chronologically starting with Acadia National Park's Seawall Campground in Southwest Harbor, Maine (04679), and ending with Fort Stevens State Park in Hammond, Oregon (97121).

Taken together, these photos describe 6,490 sites, but also 34 whole campgrounds.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Smithson, “Toward the Development of an Air Terminal Site,” Artforum, June 10, 1967. Reprinted in Nancy Holt, editor, *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 47.

<sup>2</sup> John Jakle and Keith Sculle, *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 105.

<sup>3</sup> Federal statistics are as follow: 25,800 sites in national parks; 70,100 sites on lands managed by the Forest Service; and 17,500 other sites (Bureau of Land Management, etc.). All statistics compiled by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Campgrounds of America, *Kampground Directory: 2010 Edition* (Billings, MO: 2010), 28, 223.

<sup>5</sup> Walmart's informal facilities do not figure in the national count of 900,000 campsites.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2011/07/07/137496875/yosemite-cracks-down-on-campsite-scalpers>, accessed July 7, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008), 10.

<sup>8</sup> \$90 per night at KOA Cape Hatteras, NC, for example. <https://koa.com/campgrounds/cape-hatteras/site-type/cabin-accommodations> accessed July 16, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Charlie Hailey, *Campsite: Architectures of Duration and Place* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Recreation.gov represents all federally managed campgrounds from organizations like the National Park Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Land Management, and the US Forest Service.

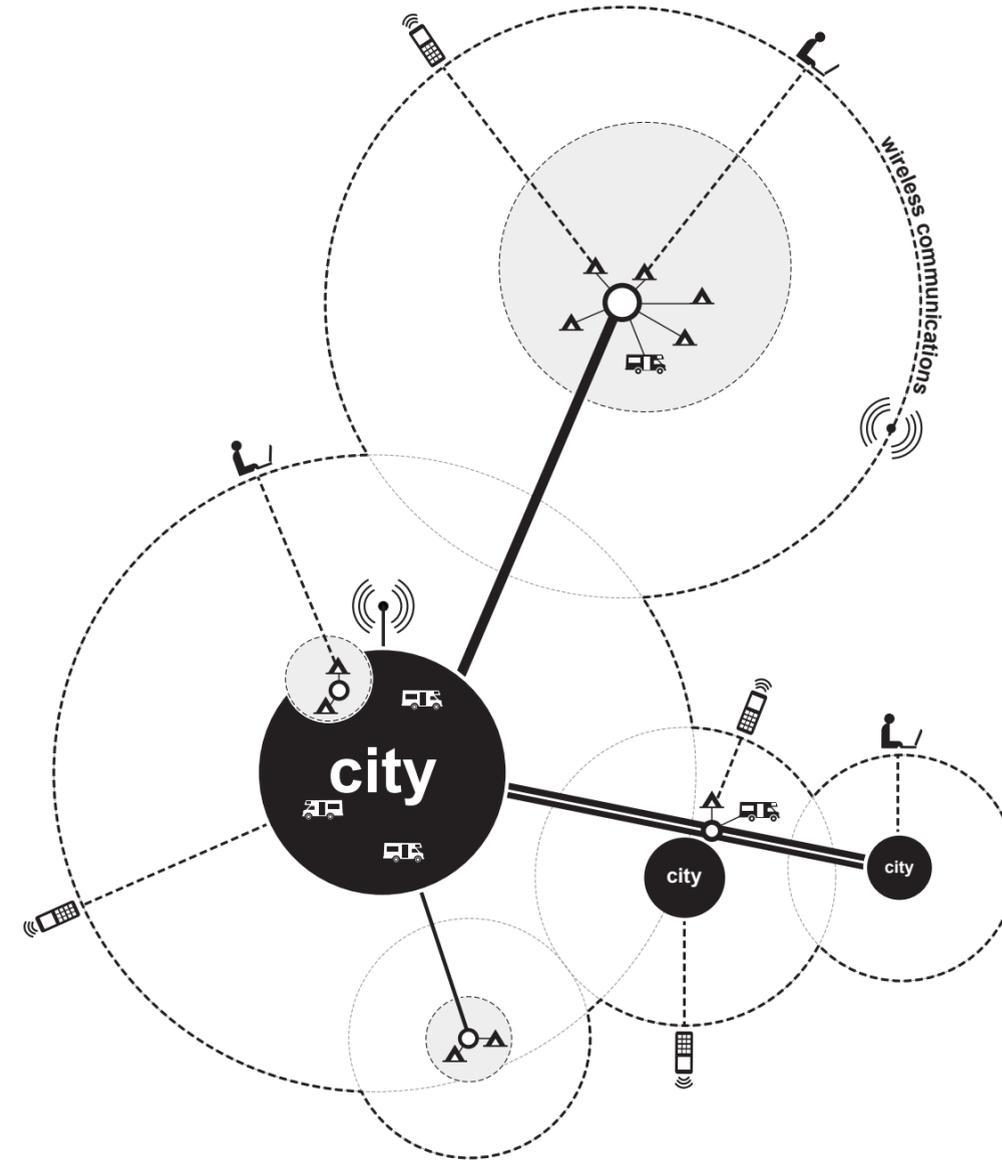
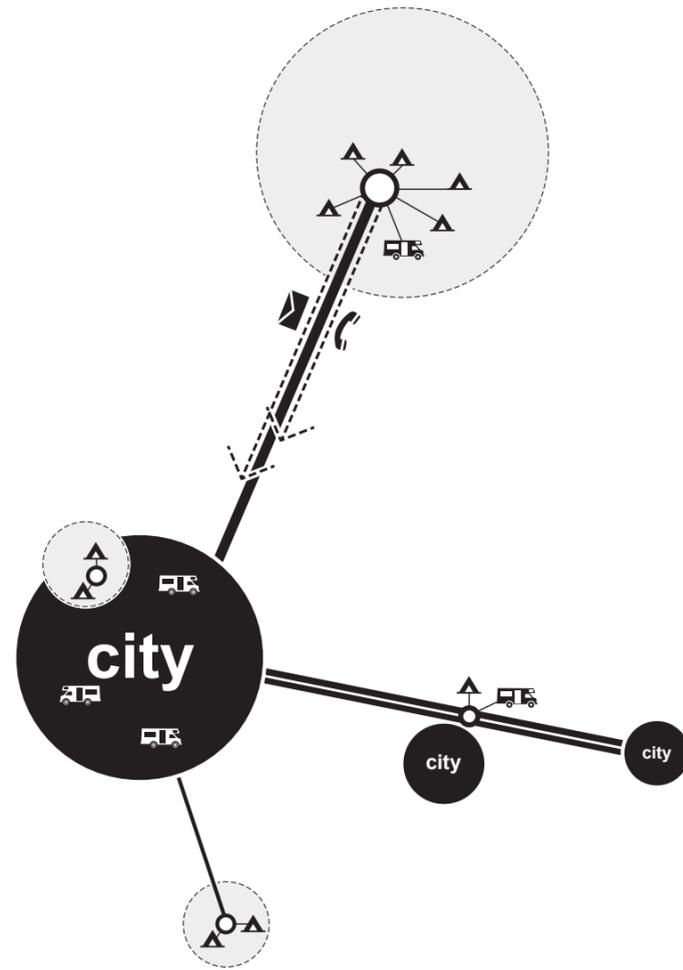
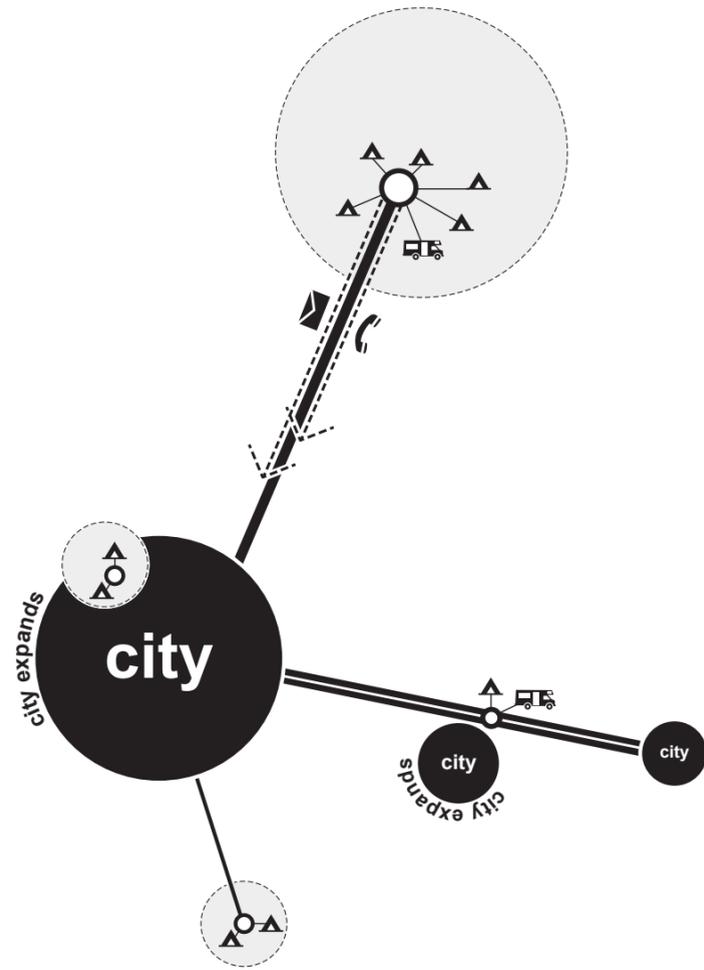
<sup>11</sup> Reserveamerica.com counts among its most important clients half of state-managed campgrounds nationwide.

<sup>12</sup> The only campground in this collection that I did visit in person is KOA Canandaigua/Rochester in Farmington, New York. Unlike reserveamerica.com and recreation.gov, KOA's website does not allow the camper to view individual sites, offering instead the option to reserve types of sites (RV sites with or without specific types of hookups, tent sites, etc.), for which only generic illustrations are available. I was interested in the experience of matching my own individual site photos to the campground map, and in walking through a campground during the off-season. I was surprised to find many large, uninhabited trailers parked there for the winter.

<sup>13</sup> The only visible evidence appears to be the shadow of the lone photographer standing before Assateague's Oceanside campground, site 103.

<sup>14</sup> Many images are so similar that only careful scrutiny can help the reader differentiate between them. Among these, some images are in fact the same (Cheney State Park's Wichita Point sites 049 and 050, for example) which probably occurred unintentionally, or suggests that there are two sites within the same photograph.

<sup>15</sup> This figure reflects my full inventory of these 34 facilities taken during the summer of 2014 and includes sites for which no photographs are available. Interestingly, as of late 2015 this figure has crept up slightly to 6,650 campsites. This suggests that either new campsites have been developed since, or that previously existing campsites have been integrated into the online system.



**1960–1980**  
**State parks and urbanization**

The development of KOA into the first national, privately owned chain of campgrounds is anything but premeditated. In 1962 founder Dave Drum acquires the property on which the first franchise briefly stands at Orchard Lane near Riverfront Park in Billings, Montana, intending the purchase as a land-banking strategy in anticipation of the development of Interstate 90. Convinced by the growing popularity of camping and the enthusiasm of his guests, Drum promotes his vision of an easily accessible campground close to highway exits featuring a neatly packaged set of services akin to those offered by others in the hospitality industry. KOA's growth is explosive, expanding from a single campground in 1962 to 829 nationwide by 1979. By the mid-1960s it has already surpassed the National Park Service in number of individual campsites.

**2000–present**  
**Walmart: The parking lot as campground**

Walmart's 2001 decision to permit RVs to park for the night in its parking lots, free of charge, creates a network of thousands of new campground facilities more or less overnight. The announcement suggests a financial interest similar to those of municipal campgrounds in the 1920s. Says one Walmart spokesperson: "We treat them as shoppers who take a long time to make up their minds" (see note 23 on page 50).

**2000–present**  
**Virtual proximity**

The Internet is slowly altering the experience of camping. Wireless access is becoming standard at many campgrounds, and campers can now update blogs and send and receive emails from their tent in the wilderness. An expanding network of towers makes cell phone communication possible nearly anywhere: even in remote areas of the American West, the camper can link up to the outside world, taking us yet further away from the old idealization of the nature campground as wild place.

04679

44°14'30" N 68°18'22" W

Seawall campground  
Acadia National Park  
National Park Service  
Southwest Harbor, ME  
195 campsites

Source: National Park Service/recreation.gov





