

A Visit to Aspen's Surprising Bauhaus Enclave

Designer Herbert Bayer helped transform the Colorado mountain town into a hub for skiing and culture. I went to the newly revamped Aspen Institute campus to see what remains of his modernist influence.

Text by

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When Chicago businessman Walter Paepcke first visited Aspen, Colorado, in 1945, it was a quiet, former mining boomtown fully in its bust years, whose population had dwindled to below 1,000. There was no ski resort, just a few runs and zero chair lifts, and no Balenciaga or Prada stores. The main road, Highway 82, was still open range.

Still, Aspen's natural beauty inspired Paepcke; he saw it as the perfect place for clearing the mind—and, perhaps, for a bit of networking—something everyone, from artists to fellow businessmen, could appreciate. To draw great thinkers to the town, he envisioned an institute inspired by philosopher Mortimer Adler's Great Books seminar at the University of Chicago (which he had attended), and predicated on the idea that most issues that arose in business were not technical problems but moral or intellectual ones. Though an industrialist and patron of the arts—helping fund the New Bauhaus school in Chicago—Paepcke wasn't an artist or designer (he ran the Container Corporation of America, a corrugated-box manufacturer). So, to help transform his vision for the sleepy mountain town and the newly established Aspen Institute, he would need a little help.

Paepcke's first pick to design the Institute was German architect and Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius. Gropius declined, but instead suggested Herbert Bayer, a Bauhaus-educated Austrian designer who had spent much of the 1920s studying and teaching at the German art school before a stint as art director for *Vogue* Berlin. In 1938, the imminent onset of World War II prompted Bayer and his first wife, Irene Bayer-Hecht, to leave Germany for New York, and in 1946, at Paepcke's invitation, Bayer moved with his second wife, Joella Synara Haweis, to Aspen.

The Aspen Institute, however, would prove to be Bayer's magnum opus: Today, the campus includes Aspen Meadows Resort, where I was invited to spend a few days in January. After lightly familiarizing myself with Bayer's work, it was easy to see his mark everywhere on the campus: the low-slung, rectangular buildings, built with cinder block, are utilitarian and unobtrusive, prioritizing large windows that open out to a view of the campus meadows and, beyond, Aspen Mountain—as though, like the octagonal lodge that once stood at the top of the mountain, any bit of wall not reserved for a view outside would be wasted space. The landscape is softer and rounder than the buildings, made up of undulating streams that do double duty as irrigation ditches, and paths that wind around Bayer's famous earthworks and down to the banks of the Rio Grande.

In 2022, Salamander Resorts began operating Aspen Meadows, and along with the Institute embarked on a series of renovations to honor Bayer's original design. Historical preservation rules prohibited them from any exterior renovation other than paintwork, but the interiors have been redesigned with an eye toward functionality: my suite had a comfortable banquette for eating or working, a small nook for storing ski clothes, a stretch of windows on either end, and a small balcony. The palette is mostly contained to neutrals, reds, and blues, and simple geometry, soothing on the eyes and mind.



The Aspen Meadow Resort's rooms recently underwent a renovation led by Suomi Design Works.

Courtesy Aspen Meadows Resort