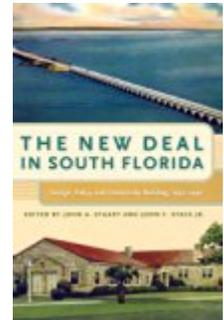


John A. Stuart, John F. Stack, eds. *The New Deal in South Florida: Design, Policy, and Community Building, 1933-1940*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. xx + 243 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-3191-0.



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Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

Conventional wisdom holds that modern Florida began with World War II. The massive growth associated with the development of military bases, the economic boom created by war-related industries, and the positive memories of the state carried back home by thousands of veterans combined to propel the Sunshine State from a sleepy backwater into a dynamic engine of the Sunbelt. The six essays that comprise *The New Deal in South Florida* revise this interpretation and argue that modern Florida actually began in the 1930s with the government programs of the New Deal. Focusing on the importance of the New Deal to south Florida's built environment, these essays conclude that "south Florida arose out of the Great Depression to become one of America's primary postwar playgrounds" (p. 25).

The varied pieces in this work reflect the wide range of efforts made by New Deal agencies and organizations to combat the Depression in southern Florida. Not wedded to a single strategy, or even to a coherent economic theory, the New

Deal provided a series of ad hoc and uncoordinated attempts to jumpstart the American economy. Because of this pragmatic approach, some programs challenged existing social and economic norms while others reinforced them. As John F. Stack and John A. Stuart, coeditors of this collection, conclude in their introductory chapter, "these tensions are embedded in the basic fabric of New Deal activities" (p. 24). The "tensions" that Stack and Stuart discuss include issues of race, class, and age; concerns over the fragile south Florida ecosystem; and the uses and value of public art in creating an identity for the south Florida region. By providing the book's analytical framework, this tension in the aims and goals of New Deal programs shows that south Florida's move toward modernity was neither straightforward nor easy.

Stack and Stuart's introductory chapter analyzes the general impact of the New Deal on south Florida and attempts to provide a coherent framework for the five much more specific pieces that

follow. The editors examine not only New Deal programs but also the responses of south Floridians to these initiatives and their effects on families, communities, and environments. Using letters written by south Florida clergymen to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, they describe a community torn by the New Deal's approach to solving the problems of the Great Depression. The letters "display concerns about economic development, the intrusion of federal programs in local communities, issues of race and racism, and uneasiness about the nature of the welfare state" (p. 7). In 1935, Reverend Arthur Dimmock of Key West summed up the mixed legacy of the New Deal when he wrote to the president, "in spite of many blunders ..., Key West has benefited from the aid of the Relief Administration" (p. 8).

The next five chapters build on this notion of tension in the goals, aims, and implementation of the New Deal. Focusing on a wide variety of programs, these chapters examine in minute detail how the New Deal both changed and reaffirmed the physical, environmental, and intellectual landscape of south Florida. From the building construction projects of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to the photographs of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), from the production of post office murals under the auspices of the WPA to the camps of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and finally to the development of Public Works Administration (PWA) public housing, these pieces examine the ground level successes and failures of the New Deal. All the authors are especially good at examining the ambivalent legacy of the New Deal. For example, Stuart, in his chapter entitled "Constructing Identity," concludes that the spate of structures built through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the WPA, and the PWA "made Miami a more livable city for residents and visitors." However, he also indicates that they "made Miami more vulnerable to the waves of tourists arriving in the area" (p. 64). Yet that very vulnerability to

tourism remade Miami's identity as a winter playground and provided a much needed boost to the area's economy by the late 1930s.

While Stuart focuses on the interplay between tourists and natives and the reshaping of that relationship through the New Deal, Mary Woods, an architecture professor at Cornell, examines class dynamics in south Florida in her piece on the photographs of Marion Post Wolcott. Less well known than her FSA counterparts Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Gordon Parks, Wolcott nevertheless provided a poignant examination of life in south Florida in the 1930s. Woods concludes that Wolcott's pictures show Miami and south Florida "as places apart and yet tied to modern America." While "many of her photographs celebrated the New Deal, others made visible the fault lines of race, gender, and class just below the surfaces of south Florida" (p. 72). The photographs (twenty of which are reproduced in the chapter) and Woods's analysis of them bring into focus (no pun intended!) the juxtaposition of a poor and overwhelmingly African American agricultural labor force existing next to the glitter of Miami Beach's Art Deco hotels. By providing "glimpses of a future Miami, a Sun Belt City," Woods's discussion of the New Deal photography program verifies just how much south Florida had changed in the 1930s (p. 114).

Marianne Lamonaca, a south Florida museum curator, continues Woods's emphasis on the visual arts by examining the painting of post office murals in Miami, Miami Beach, Palm Beach, and West Palm Beach. Taking themes from Florida's history, the murals conveyed "how the community defined itself in the past, and what it looked forward to in the future" (p. 151). Lamonaca contends that the murals, painted under the auspices of the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture, provided a sense of shared identity and developed an imagined past (and present) where all community members work together for the benefit of the common

good. Produced at a time when Americans needed to pull together, the murals “showed that the nation’s success depended on the contributions of millions of individuals” (p. 151). Simultaneously, however, they also glossed over issues of race, ethnicity, and gender as they provided images very much in keeping with the prevailing community ideals of a state still a part of the Jim Crow South.

The last two essays analyze the New Deal’s relationship with south Florida’s built environment. In his essay on the CCC, Ted Baker, a professor of landscape architecture at Florida International University, examines the ambivalent legacy of the CCC regarding south Florida’s unique natural environment. Caught between “the ‘wild’ south Florida landscape and one tamed for human consumption,” the CCC built a series of recreational facilities that significantly improved access to many of the region’s most important natural areas (p. 183). In the process, however, they often turned the region’s “largely inhospitable mangrove and pine forests ... into a sanitized environment with hills and sandy beaches” (p. 176). Baker’s nuanced analysis points out the problems of competing recreational visions (active versus passive, manmade versus natural), especially in an area of rapid population growth, and the CCC’s attempt to transcend those differences. For Baker, the very fact that CCC officials were at least aware of these issues shows a breadth of vision not often seen in the 1930s.

Stuart’s closing essay, “Liberty Square: Florida’s First Public Housing Project,” is the best piece in the collection as it examines the building of what was considered an innovative development in the 1930s. Built by the PWA’s Housing Division in a relatively isolated area, the project, designed to house several thousand of Miami’s black residents, altered “the highly contentious racial geography” of south Florida while also “reinforc[ing] notions of racial segregation and isolation” (p. 186). Taking into consideration differences of

opinion about the project in Miami’s both white and black communities, Stuart concludes that “for black working-class American populations ... already stigmatized and marginalized by a culture of racism, the separation provided by Liberty Square ... offered little hope for a future of racial quality” (p. 216). The piece reminds readers that built environments do not just randomly arise; instead they develop out of conscious decisions made by both elite business and government officials and ordinary working people. It also shows that the effects of New Deal programs have lasted well into the twenty-first century and shape the lives of current south Florida residents in profound ways.

This is an important book that provides a provocative window into a time when concerted government action reshaped the landscape, both literally and figuratively, of south Florida. Thanks to the programs of the federal government’s New Deal, this area was a much different place in 1940 than it was in 1930. That said, two omissions make it less valuable than it could be. First, the development of the Overseas Highway under the PWA profoundly changed the relationship of the Keys to mainland Florida and the rest of the nation, and was arguably the most visible New Deal project in the region. And yet, it merits only a few pages and not its own essay—in spite of providing the cover art for the book. Certainly, a dedicated piece describing the construction of the highway and the changes it brought to the Keys in general and Key West in particular would have added to the value of the book. Second, these essays provide a nice overview of the New Deal’s impact but a concluding chapter that builds on them and ties them together in a coherent whole would have been a fitting ending to the book. As it now stands, one must draw one’s own conclusions from the disparate essays. These are relatively minor problems, however, with a fine multidisciplinary collection about an important and heretofore rather neglected subject.

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