The New Deal in South Florida: Design, Policy, and Community Building, 1933-1940 edited by John A. Stuart and John F. Stack Jr.

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Scholars have been working through New Deal history for about seventy years now. Nevertheless, they know surprisingly little about the impact of New Deal policies and agencies in Florida. This edited collection of essays aims to remedy that lack by exploring the ways in which New Deal building, design, and community development programs helped to transform South Florida in the 1930s. Miami, especially, benefitted from an enormous federal investment in basic infrastructure. Construction of a well-planned public housing project brought modern living to hundreds of African American families, but it also initiated major changes in Miami’s racial space. Young men working for the Civilian Conservation Corps built numerous distinctive parks that showcased the tropical environment. Distinctive architecture, colorful public art, and dramatic documentary photography reflected modernist design influences and shaped Miami’s and South Florida’s popular image.

The book’s opening essay, an overview by coeditors John Stack and John Stuart, emphasizes the way New Deal projects merged physical and cultural goals and paved the way for South Florida’s eventual emergence as a dominant Sunbelt region. Stack and Stuart build on the insights of the historian Jason Scott Smith, whose Building New Deal Liberalism (2006) makes a convincing case that New Deal public works programs emerged as powerful method for state-sponsored economic development. South Florida suffered during the Depression years, but the implementation of federal public works and other programs ultimately brought recovery and expansion of the regional economy. John Stuart’s essay on construction and public works documents the vastness and variety of New Deal building projects in South Florida, including schools, parks, highways, public buildings, community centers, the Orange Bowl, and work on hospitals, airports, the Intracoastal Waterway, and the Overseas Highway linking Miami and Key West. Public buildings, especially, Stuart writes, had modernist architecture (such as art deco buildings in Miami Beach) or distinctive design using local materials, contributing to an emerging sense of community identity.

Two essays focus on documentary photography and public art in South Florida. Mary N. Woods’s essay discusses Marion Post Wolcott’s Farm Security Administration photographs of Depression-era people and New Deal public works projects in South Florida, both rural and urban. She argues that Wolcott’s photos of Miami, Miami Beach, and Palm Beach helped to construct “a new urban identity” for South Florida—an identity invested with modernity that increasingly helped to burnish the tourist industry in the area. Also dealing with New Deal support of the arts, Marianne Lamonaca writes about the dramatic post office murals in Miami, Miami Beach, Palm Beach, and West Palm Beach. After explaining the process of selecting artists...
and subject matter, Lamonaca describes four murals portraying historical episodes or landscapes from Florida’s past: Spanish conquistadors, Seminole Indians, Palm Beach County’s “barefoot mailman,” and a collage of images depicting the growth of a South Florida tropical paradise. The New Deal’s post office mural program, Lamonaca suggests, celebrated regional culture but also linked local people to their government.

Two final essays return to the subject of public works and public housing. Ted Baker details the work accomplished in South Florida by one of the New Deal’s most popular agencies, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). President Roosevelt had a great interest in conservation and the preservation of natural landscapes. Beginning in 1933, CCC volunteers advanced Roosevelt’s agenda, building numerous county and state parks in South Florida, including such popular sites as Matheson Hammock State Park and Fairchild Tropical Garden. They also worked on landscaping the Overseas Highway to Key West. Finally, Stuart’s second contribution relates the complex history of Liberty Square, Miami’s first public housing project for African Americans. Controversial from the beginning, Liberty Square was supported by white and black civic leaders, but for different reasons. Blacks wanted better housing opportunities than those in the Overtown ghetto, while white leaders expressed concerns about the possibility of contagious diseases in older slum areas spilling over into white neighborhoods. White land speculators and developers saw opportunities in the mostly empty space around the new housing project some five miles northwest of downtown Miami, or hoped to push blacks out of Overtown to make way for expansion of the downtown business district. Whites living near the Liberty Square site protested changing racial boundaries, but the project was built anyway, eventually becoming the nucleus of a new “second ghetto” in northwest Dade County.

This book is not a comprehensive history of the New Deal in Florida or South Florida, although such a study surely is needed. Each of the essays is interesting and competently written, and each makes an important contribution, but the links among them are not fully fleshed out. Nevertheless, the book’s six authors, including the editors, have made a fascinating initial foray into South Florida’s New Deal history, paving the way for the more detailed studies that are sure to follow.

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