



HAL
open science

The Ambiguous Image of New Deal “Model Towns”

Jean Kempf

► **To cite this version:**

| Jean Kempf. The Ambiguous Image of New Deal “Model Towns”. 2002. halshs-00381623

HAL Id: halshs-00381623

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00381623>

Preprint submitted on 6 May 2009

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Ambiguous Image of New Deal «Model Towns»

The topic of the form and structure of the urban space and its relation with the « country » environment is one which was prominent in New Deal culture. It forms a strong intellectual and political link with previous periods and the evolution of the conception of the city in the 1933-1943 decade is especially interesting because of its ambiguity.

This paper suggests that by following the conceptualization of the urban space—more specifically of small towns—through New Deal photography one can perceive a shift from a modernist, constructivist New Deal (roughly between 1934-35 and 1938) to a conservative, « organic » New Deal, after 1938. And the visible shift that took place at that moment is indicative of changing ideologies and public strategies in what constitutes a preparation for a cultural levelling by the middle class in the post-war years. It looks as if this « regressive » period worked as a countervailing force against the standardization required in the new mass capitalist society whose structure had evolved since the mid-19th century with the ever widening web of exchanges. The « return to Arcadia » acted in the ubiquitous field of visual communication as a means to try to overcome the impossible contradictions of a society where the « common man » was to make way for the « average man ».

FSA photographs provide a convenient and significant access to those questions because they are consistently organized and were made by professional—or almost professional—photographers, thus ensuring a rather strong adequation of form to function.¹

In 1914, Walter Lippman said of Woodrow Wilson : « He knows that there is a new world demanding new methods, but he dreams of an older world. He is torn between the two. It is a very deep conflict in him between what he knows and what he feels ».² In his usual pungent way, the famous American intellectual (if there were any) perfectly characterized the 1920s by defining it as a tension between « progress and nostalgia » as Lawrence Levine posits in his important article But such contradiction may even be truer of the 1930s, because the Depression can be seen as a crisis of adjustment to fundamentally new

¹ Studying the many images made by countless amateurs in the agencies, especially at local level, and even in the WPA programs, is hardly significant as the visual incompetence and illiteracy of the operators makes analysis of little significance. See however Peter Daniel, Merry A. Forresta, Maren Stange and Sally Stein, *Official Images. New Deal Photography* (Washington, D.C. : Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987).

² In Lawrence Levine, « Progress and Nostalgia », in *The Unpredictable Past. Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1993), 200.

paradigms, and first and foremost that of exchanges.³ But, contrary to what one might expect, FSA images when taken from the bulk of the file do not show a growing adjustment to « modernity », starting from what was available—the vernacular structure of the « small town »— in order to gradually introduce the « new town », presumably more adapted to the world of tomorrow. Actually rather the contrary happens, as images exemplifies a complex return to vernacular forms after a foray into the avenues of modernity. This paper will only concentrate on the first stage of this process.

Under the leadership of Rexford Tugwell, the Resettlement Administration started in 1935 a whole series of projects, temporary relief ones of course — the RA/FSA camps — but also an ambitious building project of garden cities, the Green Towns.⁴ The detailed history of the four Green Towns ever built⁵ has been made elsewhere ; we will rather concentrate here on their photographic *representation*.⁶ Indeed, the central feature in the project was the creation of a *model*, in a mass society where the image already occupied a key position. Thus one may see those cities as belonging as much to the « publicity » sphere as to that of urban planning. Just as priming up the pump was one of the tenets of keynesian economics, priming up the symbolic pump was one of Tugwell's central ideas and tools.⁷ But as results proved disappointing, both in visual and real terms, and as « rampant collectivism » came under regular attacks, the symbolic/visual center shifted from a modern(ist) model to the

³ I am therefore fully subscribing to Levine's opening statement that :« the central paradox in American history [...] has been a belief in progress coupled with a dread of change ; an urge towards the inevitable future combined with a longing for the irretrievable past. » (191).

⁴ The other big New Deal projects in that respect were that of the Subsistence Homesteads. Most of the things I am developing here about the « Green Towns » are applicable to those projects which replicate many of the same features, only on a smaller scale.

⁵ Greenbelt, Maryland ; Greenhills, Ohio ; Greendale, Wisconsin ; Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey, plus about a hundred Subsistence Homesteads and other communities built by various agencies, most notably Cumberland Homesteads, Crossville, Tennessee and Arthurdale Homesteads, Arthurdale, WV, for coal workers ; Aberdeen Gardens, Hampton, Virginia, Newport News Homesteads, Newport News, Virginia (for African-Americans).

⁶ For an in-depth study of Greenbelt, see Cathy D. Knepper, *Greenbelt, Maryland : A Living Legacy of the New Deal* (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). Also : Mary Lou Williamson (ed.), *Greenbelt : History of a New Town, 1937-1987* (Norfolk, Va. : Donning, 1987). Most of the sources for this study are drawn from the Library of Congress American Memory web site (<http://memory.loc.gov>) as well as from those published in Carl Fleischhauer and Berverley Brannan, *Documenting America. 1935-1943* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1988), and the numerous volumes of FSA photographs published in the state-by-state anthologies.

⁷ When Boorstin wrote his seminal book, *The Image or What Happened To The American Dream* (New York : Atheneum, 1961), he formulated a theory that post-Depression America was a world totally constructed around representation—although, of course, very real things did happen ; they had ceased to be, however, the alpha and omega of *politics*.

archaic form of the « real » homegrown traditional American small town that could be found all over the continent. What took place, however, was more than the replacement of a « public-sector » version of utopia by a private-sector one, as James Curtis suggests in his sensitive—and sensible—study of FSA photography.⁸ Roy Stryker and his FSA crew were fascinated with the vernacular and indisputably searched for the sort of « middle landscape » theorized by Leo Marx, the small town as pastoral space of the Nation. The real reason for this shift, however, was the insurmountable contradictions of the Green Towns themselves, as their image in official photographs perfectly demonstrated.⁹

I — Fabricating the environment

Most of the existing images of the Green Towns are of their construction and of partially completed sections. This is not mere historical coincidence. It is as if the new town was first and foremost a *process*, a space in the making.

This « new » space begins by dis-location. Just as the American experiment began both symbolically and in actuality by a transportation and a cesura, for New Deal planners the reinvention of the city was less a matter of rehabilitation than of creation, less a matter of repairing buildings or structures than of planning new and better ones. It is even present in the very name of the agency, the « Resettlement Administration ». The territory was in need of reorganization, which meant planning and rearrangement according to « higher principles », those of rational analysis and efficiency. Thus, came the idea of building cities in the country, as Alphonse Allais, the French 19th century humorist once said, because cities were necessary and the country was indispensable.

The Green Town must first and foremost look good from above. The aerial view or the map/blue-print is the first step conveying the harmony of the whole, as well as its main characteristic, that of being turned inward, insulated from the rest of the territory by a green belt, hence their generic name where the stress lies less on « green » (the greenery within the town limits) than on « belt » (the greenery protecting it from the outside world). The master plan, the curving streets as well as the radiating streets visualize—but only in the image and never for the pedestrian—the flower or clover-leaf type of layout that signify the town's true nature. Unsurprisingly, this very image of the blueprint and the drawing board became, in the case of Jersey Homesteads an emblem—albeit a controversial one—of the whole operation. Ben Shahn ended his huge triptych

⁸ James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth. FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1989), 101.

⁹ I will compare the New Town images with that of the migrant camps which are rhetorically very similar.

mural for the town (where he and his wife moved in) by a scene summing up, in perfect socialist realistic mode, the spirit of the operation [illustration ?]. The map of the new town is the connecting link between people, as well as between the people and the leaders. Supervising the whole, exactly where the crucifix would have hung in other settings, a poster of FDR, « the gallant leader », between the image of a coöp and that of a mother and child, puts the crowning touch to the message.

The same can be said of the use by photographers of the Bauhaus-like architecture of some of the towns (especially Greenbelt, Md). The geometrical lines and the flat white surfaces as well as the row alignments are used to suggest the coherence of the whole, the integration of the general design more than the sheer beauty of each of the individual pieces. This emphasis on planning is obviously not without its own paradox. Of course planning means rationality, a basic tenet of capitalistic economy, and those photographs and their accompanying comments try to establish precisely that against the complaints at inefficiency especially of building procedures. But here planning also points at the fact that everything here is a creation of government (thus the high cost of buildings) and the operation is cooperative. Paradoxically then, it is the communal — or communal — aspect that came under attack while at the same time it was heralded by writers and ideologues alike as a fundamental component of the American character.

And indeed these towns were ambivalent: deeply embedded in an American tradition through their names (Jersey Homesteads and Subsistence Homesteads, even the generic Greenbelt, Greenhill, Greenville sound like traditional American toponyms) they remained an imported concept. For although clearly many if not all of the original American settlements (Jamestown, Williamsburgh, Philadelphia to name but a few) as well as the Federal Capital were perforce—or at least understandably—« planned communities », the « garden city » is on the contrary a deeply European (and specifically British) concept. It entails a peculiar conception of the notion of « community » as well as a specific relation to the occupation of the land which was born out of European experience and history.

The images which dominate the iconography of those projects are those of construction sites, or of buildings in the making. These are not mere historical coincidence. Part of the social and cultural project of those homesteads, and partially of the new towns, was to involve the residents in the making of their own dwellings. Also, showing « work » in the 1930s was generally thought to be a form of self-stimulation (and of *pro domo* propaganda) towards recovery. In the process, however, the construction site is established as a metaphor of society, and beyond of America. The machine as icon, emblem and even God, is displaced here towards the object : the fruit, the product, the new structure being erected (see frame and beams images) — the same images are to be found with skyscrapers — but also the bowels of the earth repeatedly

exposed, a classic late 19th century image. In that context they are the signs of a « society that works », as well as one which cannot satisfy itself with merely the inherited but must set up its legitimacy on the will to transform. This peculiar dominance of the *construction* site over the *factory* also connects, in representation, the « winning of the West » by civil engineers and the post-modern fascination for foundations and buildings as metaphor of the workings of discourse.¹⁰ Where modernism streamlined its objects (that is to say make them as smooth, as unobtrusive, as perfectly fitting and efficient as possible), post-modern sensibility build itself on rasping and grinding, on asperities and disjunctions, on breaks rather than the seamlessness of modernist forms.

II — A Safe World

Those menacing disjunctions are precisely visible in the permanently transient character of « making-of » images. This is why their documentary value notwithstanding, they were actually of little use for promotion purposes.¹¹

The main staple of new town publicity was therefore elsewhere, in the patient construction of the image of a safe world. Lawrence Levine aptly reminds us that one of the central concerns of those dark years was a yearning for security.¹² Green Towns images give a lot of that, as do Subsistence Homesteads images and FSA migrant camps— and that is probably their salient rhetorical feature. The streets of the Green Towns, as opposed to those from which many of the residents came, are safe for children and adults alike, broad, clean and white, and sheltered from automobile traffic : this is how one should understand these repeated views of underpasses whose single endlessly repeated message is « safety, safety, safety ».¹³

In fact the images of New Towns and FSA camps are an exact reprise — only inverted — of the traditional « reform » photography whose paradigm was established by Jacob Riis.¹⁴ Where Riis' inquisitive eye and flash light relentlessly explored the darkest corners of urban squalor metaphorized into social rot, New Town images are bright and sunny as the weather they were made in. Photographers in the Green Towns hardly ever used artificial lighting,

¹⁰ A typical contemporary example is Lewis Baltz, *Park City* (New York/Albuquerque : Aperture/Artspace Press, 1980).

¹¹ As James Curtis (94-95) notes.

¹² Levine, *Unpredictable Past*, 207-230.

¹³ When residents of the FSA relief camps were displaced farmers, residents of the new towns were for the most part former tenement residents, at least as far as Greenbelt and Jersey Homestead were concerned.

¹⁴ Probably more than by Lewis Hine whose case is somewhat different although his photographs shared some of the same characteristics as Hine's. For a relevant analysis, see Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life. Social Documentary Photography 1890-1950* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1989).

and for a very good reason : rooms were so well lit that such device was often unnecessary in the first place. And even when flash lights were used (as in FSA labor camps for instance or in some interior shots) it is done in such a way as to simulate natural light and merely to enhance the volumes and the large flat white spaces of the appartments.

There is, however, a deeper motive for that. Despite the regular presence of people — mostly man and women at work and children at play, a significant bias in itself — most images show the envelope, the architecture or the interior design of the houses and appartments. The reason is to be found in the deep behaviorist ideology pervading those projects : changing life by changing the living environment, a position inherited from the generalization of social darwinism in American reform movements (as opposed to political reform or revolutionary movements) to which the New Deal was the direct heir.¹⁵ But in the context of mass society, the engineering of space must serve a double function, that of « instrument » and that of « monument » as well, which calls in photography as the indispensable partner in the construction of reform as a tangible — that is to say visible — fact. In that respect the design of houses and interiors fonctionned as sign of change almost as much as actual change.¹⁶

The relationship between human beings and the built environment is also typically inherited and contrasted from urban reform photography, once more making the New Towns the natural continuators of America's changing urban experience, and the migrant camps the (temporary stage of) transition *to the city* for displaced farmers. First there are very few people in those images, partly because those were new towns, and — actually — not quite inhabited/lived-in yet (as testified by the numerous model houses and moving-in scenes), and because the envelope was probably more important *at that stage*. But the rarity of people also gives a strong sense of space, of an antidote to the essential overcrowding of the metropolis. This was complemented by the visual use of the wide spaces in between houses,¹⁷ the broad streets where children could play and women could walk their strollers, a total inversion of the common images of antlike figures swarming the big city.

Even the way the characters are arranged in the images is significant. While the standard presentation in turn-of-the-century reform photography was the pose, facing the camera, for both technical and rhetorical reasons, the

¹⁵ The filiation also involves literature with the novel ; see Simon J. Bronner (ed.), *Consuming Visions. Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920* (New York : W.W. Norton, 1989), 14-15.

¹⁶ The limitations in that field are also patent, as noted by Walter Benjamin in his famous remark about the Krupp factory (*Literarische Welt*, September 18,25, October 2, 1931) : after all, the images of the Jersey Homesteads cooperative garment factory or the Maryland cooperative gas station, look terribly like that of a normal clothes workshop or of a gas station. Only the *caption* may suggest a difference of any sort.

¹⁷ Greenhills, 21-40. Greendale, 1-20.

presence now evolved towards a much more natural attitude, almost as in casual snapshot images. In reform photographs, it was as if moments of « real life » were arrested for the photographer, the « subjects » presenting themselves to the photographer, and beyond to society forced to look upon them, often not as victims but as proud individuals despite their dire circumstances.¹⁸ On the contrary, here, the photographer with the *complicity of the subjects* tries to stage « use », « usage » and « usefulness » in a completely artificial — or at least fabricated — context. Paradoxically those new happier individuals appear as « models » in a showroom or catalogue for the good life, and somewhat lose their status by their instrumentalization.

As for those not working at constructing the new dwellings, or in the cooperative garment factory, they are mostly portrayed in their leisure activity : lying with friends on the lawn in a typically campus attitude (Greenbelt 21-40), camping in their huge back lawn (Greendale, Wisconsin, 1-20), or enjoying the swimming pool. All these images are traditional modernist icons of healthy living. For health, and its attendant signified safety, constitutes the core of New Town as well as FSA camp rhetoric.

Countless images show us medical centers, doctors and dentists at work, and of course pediatric care. Such easy unheard-of access to health care, despite its strong connotation of anti-liberal economics, worked as a general, overarching symbolism for the cure of society's illness, a cure that merely required organization and knowledge, a cure that was based upon the fight against ignorance, the eventual source of all illnesses. These images have to be seen next to the companion pieces in the numerous educational/learning activities (attending the library, or various classes in home economics or family skills) that literally punctate the files, not only of the FSA but also of all New Deal agencies.¹⁹

There is, however, another dimension to the health metaphor, namely *whiteness*. The whiteness of walls, of interiors as well as exteriors, the whiteness of sheets in the nursery (FSA camp 199), the whiteness of kitchen utensils (Greenbelt 21-40) are reinforced by the see-through perspectives and the immaculate emptiness of model interiors. This ever present paradigm connects those projects, in a more than perfunctory way, to the 1893 Columbian Exposition « White City ».²⁰ For as Warren Susman suggests in « The City in American Culture » here lies the founding paradigm of a « first great national synthesis », in the form of « a city that is ordered » (247), that « is central to

¹⁸ This has been quite convincingly demonstrated by Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life*.

¹⁹ See *Official Images*.

²⁰ See Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America. Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York : Hill & Wang, 1982), ch. 7 and passim.

American experience . . . down to the 1930s » as part of a « millennial hope » (247).²¹

In other words it can only be understood in the context of the other combined metaphors of *order*. While the whole nation exhibited its brokenness — nothing worked, cars, farms, people — those New Deal Projects displayed their nicely aligned rows of houses — or salads for that matter [illustration : Documenting America 194b] — those square Bauhaus windows and nice flat roofs, and eventually the quiet order of the home.²²

If this was not bliss, at least things were shown to be back on track. This people is a safe, happy one. Such presentation was not, however, without a serious ulterior political motive : in the field of « welfare » the Federal government was then taking over a great deal of the traditional constitutional prerogatives of the local and state governments to initiate a new form of constructed, imported, imposed and bureaucratic (it was not yet called technocratic) government. And the bottom line was nothing less than a redefinition of federalism which entailed a new form of economic integration, through expanded communication. But such an agenda was not without contradictions.

III — The Paradox of community

One of the ideas upon which both migrant camps and New Towns were built was that of attempted self-sufficiency. Obviously it could remain but an objective, a moral and intellectual principle and could never really hope to become a real economic aim. This may be seen in the creation of a prefabrication unit at Jersey Homesteads, and of course in the use of settlers or camp clients as manpower for the construction of the dwellings. The most symbolic element, however, present in the name « subsistence homestead », was that of the vegetable garden, the indispensable companion of the lodging unit both as economic supplement and as educational, even moral and symbolic tool. Jersey Homesteads was a slightly different community in that it chose its members on very select criteria, such as their ability at self-help, and at paying the sum of \$500. It was not conceived as a sleeper suburb, but as part of a back-to-the-land project, privately initiated by Benjamin Brown and supported by such prestigious immigrants as Albert Einstein, then taken over in 1935 by the RA.²³ The idea was to build a self-sustaining subsistence farm, combined with

²¹ Warren I. Susman, « The City in American Culture » in *Culture as History. The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York : Pantheon, 1984), 237-251.

²² See in particular Russell Lee, *Farm Couple, Hidalgo County, Texas, 1939* (FSA)

²³ Hence his presence on the first pannel of the Ben Shahn mural.

seasonal employment in a cooperative garment factory.²⁴ There are indeed a few images showing potatoe and wheat fields as well as portraits of those « Jewish-American farmers » complaining that « Jews are said not to be able to farm » (JH 241-260, 261-75). But besides those of the buildings most of the images of the file are of the garment factory. They show the necessary exchanges with the city, taking the form of delivery trucks (one of them displays a « moving » sign on the side) and of the fitting room where outside customers came to have clothes tailored. Those were also present in the store pictures, as in the famous image of a mother shopping for « co-op fancy cornflakes ».²⁵ Home pickles and jars were more typical of the intended message, and they are numerous in the files, but rather in the Subsistence Homesteads and the camps than in the model towns, an indication of their slightly different economic bases.²⁶

This attempt at reviving the pioneer spirit of self-reliance was simultaneoulsy deeply American and problematic in a context of a capitalistic economy which based its recovery on the stimulation of consumption. It all boiled down to a matter of finding a way out of the dependence on consumerism which had ruined many families, and at the same time of enhancing or at least reinventing it. This tension was indeed probably more serious because it was aporetic than that resulting from public management of the projects, as the original charters planned a progressive buying back of the houses by families, the governement merely acting as promoter/banker. The great ambiguity of the New Deal, can be seen at work, at a microscopic level in those town projects.²⁷ The contradiction became visible in the project of keeping cars out of the New Towns while making it technically the necessary instrument of mobility (to commute to the neighboring centers) and ideologically ultimately of individual freedom.

Even more telling is the total disappearance of any center in the photographic representation. The garden city conceived by Ebenezer Howard was seen as a wheel whose center was the « central park ».²⁸ Despite the existence of centers of community life such as the store and the school, the new settlements appear to have a lot of common space, even of public space, but

²⁴ « Jersey Homesteads : A Brief History. »

<http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/njh/Homesteads/jersey.htm>.

²⁵ [image #]

²⁶ See illustrations in *Documenting America*, 194-205.

²⁷ A contradiction also deeply informing the rise of the gangster and the gangster movie in the 1930s. See Lawrence Levine, *Unpredictable Past* 224-227. The contradiction was also noted, in 1939, by Walter Lippman commenting upon General Motors' Futurama at the World's fair : « General Motors has spent a small fortune to convince the American public that if it wishes to enjoy the full benefit of private entreprise in motor manufacturing it will have to rebuild its cities and highways by public entreprise » (Susman 225).

²⁸ Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass : MIT Press, 1965 [1898]).

hardly no — if any — *meeting* space. In that respect they were not a reproduction of older settlements — in short the New England village which is always present as historical model (a question that needs separate investigation²⁹). As a paradigmatic instance of such representation, we may take the Pie Town series by Russell Lee in 1940.³⁰ The contrast with the Green Towns is striking. Pie Town, NM, is seen first as a general store which forms a genuine center of economic life and a series of political and cultural meetings which materialize the town less as *place* than as *community*. Togetherness is also expressed through pictures of family dinners making the sense of unity even more palpable, or of the town square which functions as the local agora.³¹ The Green Towns, on the contrary, had appeared as a new space « miraculously » and costlessly liberated from this constraint by the regulating force of planning and of economic activities. While politics, or even polity, became the most important defining characteristic of small towns as seen by the FSA, it was here strangely absent, evidencing a shift, a return to values borrowed from a past made usable which constitutes the most important marker of change of the late 1930s.

The New Towns, and the camps as well,³² seem to be regulated as if by magic, all trace of government having disappeared.³³ In its place we are left with the image of individual units, individual colonists, individual clients. One series seems to me particularly revealing of that state of affairs. Arthur Rothstein, imitating the visual formula Walker Evans used for his work on the sharecroppers in Hale County, Alabama, in the summer of 1936, did a large series of individual close-up portraits of camp residents all against the same horizontal boards of the FSA office in the camp (the DoA / FSA sign is visible in some shots). Those images, often praised for their rich portraiture qualities, do have a striking impact on the viewer, as have all such extremely neutral and frontal portraits.³⁴ Together with the presentation of standardized, individual dwellings and interiors, they shift the meaning of representation from that of the

²⁹ See a partial answer in James L. Machor, *Pastoral Cities. Urban Ideals and the Symbolic Landscape of America* (Madison : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

³⁰ Curtis ch 5. See also Russell Lee in Vale, Oregon in 1941 (*Documenting America*, 206-225), the series by John Collier in New Mexico in 1943 (*ibid.*, 294-311) to name but two of the most accessible images among many others in the FSA/RA file.

³¹ Curtis, 108.

³² The case of the camps is both similar and different. In particular, the center is signified by the bureaucratic organization of the FSA, raising questions as to the democratic status of those units. But one must keep in mind that they were seen as *temporary* structures.

³³ To be quite honest one must mention in the several hundred images one of the chief of police of Greendale, Wisconsin, two of meetings not surprisingly in the most cooperative town, Greenbelt, Md.

³⁴ This « straight » device will become standard in later portrait photography. See for instance Richard Avedon's portraits.

common man — as in the collective portrait of small towns — to the « average man ». This very useful concept, borrowed from Olivier Zunz in *Why The American Century*, allows us to see a deep shift in the conceptualization of the American.³⁵ Individualized, categorized and anthropometrically reconstructed by photography—after the social sciences—, that new man was made for the new consumer and bureaucratic society that emerged from the catastrophe of the Depression. This image, however, was not quite acceptable yet in actual facts.

What we are witnessing in the infinite reproduction of individual units (houses as well as people) is of course the America of the next decade, geographically located in what was not yet called « suburbia ». This is why the photographers of the FSA turned to the construction of a « usable past » as a way out of this paradox. They searched relentlessly — and quite successfully as a matter of fact — for an older America, for the synthetic space of the small town, for the organic and homegrown community, which no longer existed but could still be visualized and even met in some preserved reservations that could give the soothing illusion that the middle space existed. But it was merely a detour into an imagined past which made the jump into yet another modernity possible if not totally painlessly.

Thus the very modernist — and forceful — New Deal gave way (with for instance the stepping out of the emblematic figure of Rex Tugwell) to a more cunning one, one that embraced archaic regression, and even conservatism, to better impose a new economic and ideological order. One will have to wait until the 1960s to see the early 1930s modernist imagery resurface, albeit with a very critical stance. But that is another story.

³⁵ Olivier Zunz, *Why The American Century* (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 65-69, 74-75, and passim, especially Part Two.