

The Beauty of Public Things

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Is nostalgia more tempting these days than it once was? It is certainly hard not to view this book's incredible project of American "recovery" through a nostalgic lens. The website Recovery.gov charted the Obama-era effort to combat the 2008 economic recession with a stimulus strategy of large-scale public investment in infrastructure. Engagingly sampling that effort, *America Recovered* creates a record of it, and reminds us of the importance of infrastructure to collective, democratic life and of shared public imagery to democratic imagination, courage, and collaborative self-governance.

It is impossible to look at this book's pictorial documentation of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and not think of the famous Work Projects Administration (WPA) projects and images that knitted together parts of a nation after the Depression and still, to this day, inspire wonder. The much-photographed monumental WPA dams stand out, fittingly, since the WPA seemed to underwrite its confidence in the power of the nation to steer the economy precisely by celebrating the human power to leash even nature to our purposes. Our hubris on the latter front has since been chastened, but it is survived for many by the still ambitious idea that government does have a welcome role to play in inspiring and securing collective action for common cause. It was this idea, surely, that motivated Barack Obama to say, during his first presidential campaign, that he wanted to "make government cool again." It is also what motivates the remarkable textual and photographic essays collected in this book.

Two differences between the WPA and the ARRA stand out in the stark relief of Chad Ress's images: The ARRA, with its focus on shovel-ready projects, many of which had been on hold for lack of available funding in an era of lowered taxation

and public disinvestment, tended to promote the local not the national and the piecemeal rather than the grand plan. Perhaps as a result, what we see in *America Recovered* are often scenes of democratic disrepair and abandonment. Are these the dystopic remains of the New Deal's once ambitious vision to render real through infrastructure the imagined community of a democratic form of life?

The second difference is this: where the WPA funded photographers to record and publicize the program's great works, the ARRA went largely unpublicized. As Jordan Carver notes in his essay, this was likely due to partisan complaints, like California Republican Darrell Issa's, about the Obama administration's use of signs and a website to promote awareness of the work of recovery. Issa claimed these public communications were evidence of the President's failure "to transition from campaign-mode to leadership-mode." They were in fact exactly the opposite, part of a presidential team's effort to lead the country on the verge of catastrophe by addressing an economic emergency via public spending and democratic accountability. But the Republican critique had its effects.

Thus, especially after the 2010 midterms, preserving the ARRA meant keeping it quiet. The ARRA would be allowed to stimulate the economy only if it did not also stimulate the senses. And yet democracies cannot thrive without the sensory stimulation of public things. If a solar energy project is built in the woods and no one is there to hear it, will it make a sound? It may generate energy for use, but it will not generate the affective civic ties among those who, in concert, are able to build what no one of them could do alone: a public thing.

Public things are not only instrumental providers of certain goods, like electricity for use or jobs for earnings. They also serve a larger constitutive purpose. They are part of the

"holding environment" of democratic citizenship, the objects of a common world, cared for in common. They gift us with their stability and relative permanence. They are both architectural and imagistic, including national parks, schools, sewage plants, prisons, transportation infrastructure, dams, archives, films, and more. They press us into debate and force us to sort out our differences, or to agree to disagree, or to mobilize better the next time. They furnish the world of democratic life and, just like furniture in a home, they help us keep our bearings, provide us with fixed points of stability as we, sometimes dizzily, coordinate or conflict with others who are like *and* unlike us. The political theorist, Hannah Arendt, coined the phrase "action in concert" for this definitive experience of democratic life. She saw such action as part of a practice of world-building in which we pursue our collective interest. And, as she pointed out, interest literally means being among others: *inter-est*.

One of my favorite examples of a public thing that positions us *inter-est* predates both the ARRA and the WPA. It is New York City's Central Park. Built in an awful swamp, the Park is a great figure for public things, which need not be cheap in order to be common, and can in fact be quite grand. Built by laborers and craftsmen with incredible skills, and using lavish materials, Central Park promised to ennoble its visitors and they in turn would later ennoble it. In particular, the park's Alhambra style tiles, whose colors do not fade out because they do not stop at the surface but run all the way through, stand as a great metaphor for public things whose power can run all the way through us so that neither they nor we fade out. No doubt, a trace of this grand idea may be what attaches a certain President to his Wall. But the aim of Central Park was not division but intersection, not to keep people out

but to bring them in. Its designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, saw Central Park as a way to put to rest an old aristocratic critique of democracies, which were said to be incapable of greatness. The park would democratize beauty, he thought. Since it is a *park*, though, it also democratizes leisure: free and open to the public, the park offers to all classes and all corners the improbable opportunity to enjoy nature in the city, to find right there in its midst respite from the demands of urban life. What could be more democratic than that?

Is it an accident that in order for the park to be built, those with the imagination to envision it had also to “drain the swamp”?

While it is tempting to blame the loss of devotion to public things in the last thirty to forty years on neoliberalism’s economic preference for privatization and disinvestment, there is in the American context something else also at work (as there was also in the Republican opposition to Obama and the ARRA): race. In the United States, what is called “public” is sometimes white, sometimes black; it is rarely both. Public housing has one racial connotation; public pools, before they were desegregated, another. Notably, it was only after public pools were desegregated that *private* pools became popular among whites, and suburban houses in dominantly white neighborhoods were built with private pools in their backyards. In short, the public things of America’s democracy have been part and parcel of a regime of white supremacy in which equal access to public things—accommodations, travel, parks, streets, and more—is denied to people of color. When equal access to public things is demanded and won by minorities, then the response of the majority in the US is often to abandon the public. White flight is not just from the urban to the suburban; it is from the public to the private thing.

The last few decades’ evacuation of the public and its degradation are the products of a perfect storm of white supremacy and neoliberalism combined. And the result has been the weathering of democracy, which cannot survive intact without public things. Without them, action in concert is disoriented, and the signs and symbols of democratic life are devitalized. If we divest democratic states or publics of their ownership of or responsibility for public things, we reduce democratic citizenship to repetitive (private) work and exceptional (public) emergencies.

The gift of this volume is its refusal to yield to the weather of privatization, its rejection, in fact, of the idea that privatization is like the weather—“nothing you can do about it!” On the contrary, we can champion public things with the understanding that they are sites of attachment that underwrite everyday citizenships and democratic sovereignties. I think this—and not their monumentalism—is what so many people still find moving about the WPA photographs: the audacity of hope that those images telegraph to us from almost a century ago. The trace of that audacity is in the bold words and images of *America Recovered*, which not only charts one past recovery—the nearly silenced steps taken after 2008 to recover from economic catastrophe—but also hopefully conjures another.

But the future may surprise us. It may not look quite like the past. Audacity now may be enacted through new styles of citizenship more like a swarm or a multitude than like the heroic, muscular workers whose images, inspiring to so many almost a century ago, still inspire to this day. What Jordan Carver calls the “infrastructural sublime” may give way to a democratic beautiful, a smaller scale inspiration that stimulates our senses but does not stop us in our tracks and

take our breath away. There may, indeed, be reason to prefer the beautiful to the sublime. The sublime is said to disturb, the beautiful (merely) to please. But at their best, democracy's small pleasures do both. The sight of workers enjoying a day off in Central Park was once surely disturbing to some. It may even have struck others as sublime.

Perhaps, then, the photographs in this book, which are surely an elegy to the once great sublimity of democracy, should be seen not as an effort to reclaim that past but as an invitation to open a different politics on the smaller scale of the beautiful. Instead of the lost glory of the former's dystopic remains, we may see in Ress's images the future glory of action in concert's not-yet: an America-to-come in which democratic citizens of all races, classes, sexualities, and genders work together for peace, equality, and justice, in large and small scale collaborations, while also enjoying together some leisure—perhaps even idling in the beautiful shade of their democracy's public things.

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