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# ReTooling

Daniel Solomon



History granted to the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt a clear and unambiguous sense of national purpose, first to recover from the Depression, then to win World War II. Some of us remember our mothers and grandmothers receiving the same simple explanation for the abrupt actions of train conductors, gas station attendants, dry cleaners, grocers, and many others, “Lady, there is a war on.”

In the early months of the Obama administration, the conversation about a new sense of national purpose has begun, and there is much in it that starts to define a similarly clear and unambiguous mission. Two articles in the *New York Times* at the end of 2008 (David Brooks’s December 9 op-ed piece, “This Old House,” and Michael

Pollan’s October 12 magazine essay, “Farmer in Chief”) reinforce one another, and we would like to add to their arguments. From different perspectives, their articles point toward a single idea that can shape policies in fields from agriculture to housing to transportation to science policy to banking and education.

The idea that is emerging from many sources in different forms is to retool America—its cities, its industry, its infrastructure, and its landscape—so it can flourish in the post-oil economy of the mid-twenty-first century. The new economy will bring changes as profound for this century as those brought by the railroad in the nineteenth or the automobile in the twentieth. Addressing

them will require a ringing sense of purpose that simultaneously addresses global warming, public health, economic recovery, and our quality of life. It will give new meaning to many forms of work—not least to architecture, town planning, and the design of landscapes.

## **New Deal Precedents**

The stunning successes and the equally stunning failures of New Deal programs during an earlier time of crisis provide many lessons for the present. The National Parks, libraries, bridges, dams, and schools executed by the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration represent some of the most enduring and

cherished public works ever conceived in America. The success of these programs was measured by the number of jobs created and by the skill, quality of effort, and use of talent marshaled in creating works of lasting value. WPA architecture evolved from and made use of the finest achievements and best talent of the 1920s. It was new and bold, but not a rupture with our history or our communities, and it was judged not by how much or how little was accomplished but by how good, how beautiful, and how lasting it was. If sustainability is our contemporary measure of success, then these great works succeed on our terms as well as those of the 1930s.

All that said, our firm (WRT/Solomon E.T.C.) has spent years working to correct the long-term failure of another ambitious New Deal program, the Public Housing Act of 1937. In President Obama's years as a community organizer in Chicago he had a vivid, firsthand experience of the nightmare that resulted from that legislation. Like the great public works of CCC and WPA, the public housing movement was motivated by the noblest and most progressive ideals of the New Deal. But public housing was conceived in a different spirit from the works of those agencies. It was the victim of a lethal combination of hubris and parsimony—radical ideas, mimicking European utopianism, executed on the cheap so that masses of America's poor could be concentrated in projects whose form and character were sharply different from their former communities, and which were doomed to fall apart. The identification of people by race, class, and unfamiliar building type was a policy disaster, and created a social scar from which our cities are still recovering.

Fortunately, housing authorities and a generation of housing providers and architects have learned from this blunder. To a large degree, HUD's HOPE VI program is based upon an understanding of what went wrong and how to redress it. Unfortunately, HOPE VI has been underfunded throughout its fifteen-year life, and its buildings are still too cheap and frail. Nevertheless, the relative success of this policy is a major achievement.

American housing now faces new challenges, deeply entwined with the energy crisis and economic health. Most Americans and most American workers cannot afford housing in the great urban centers that are served by public transportation and that should be the locus of economic activity. The auto-dependent suburban sprawl created through postwar economic policy is now the default position for planning our city regions. There are no policy tools to address the growing disparity between the costs of producing housing, particularly housing that does not depend upon automobiles, and what middle-class people can afford.

Providers of housing are trapped in a miasma of local, state and federal regulations accreted over visionless decades. Rules about fire safety, handicapped access, energy use, parking, traffic generation, historic preservation, income and age restrictions, social equity, and a dozen other worthy causes create a strangling labyrinth of contradictions, the product of which is a paralysis that makes urban middle-class housing in the service of the post-oil metropolis all but impossible. The many arms of government have become obstacles to change, not the instruments of its realization. This is the very inverse of the New Deal. We do not argue for deregulation, but for a rational and purposeful framework for regulation.

It is not hard to imagine how every well-intended, single-focus public policy could be better served within an integrated vision, free of contradictions, articulated by our new leadership. The complications, cross purposes, delays, administrative costs, and inefficacy that infect so many sectors of our economy represent here, too, the lack of a powerfully articulated, all-embracing national purpose.

### **New Deal for the Twenty-First Century**

Creating the post-oil economy and the post-oil culture in America is an imperative as stark as the need to win World War II. It is a need that should inform everything: the size and location of schools, the kinds of crops grown near cities, land use and density controls, assistance for urban workforce housing, and transportation in all its manifestations, to name a few.

For the presidency of Barack Obama to realize its great promise he will need to deliver us from the age of the specialist, the one-dimensional technocrat, and the single-issue lobbyist. The institutional structures of governance and policy that he must surmount are analogous to medical curricula, which churn out specialists in knees or the pancreas but do not address the full complexity of human health.

It has been said that the tide of battle turned during 1942 because Winston Churchill unleashed the full fury of the English language on the Axis powers. How different the policy landscape might be if the eloquence of our new President could give purpose to the work of this generation of Americans.

**Opposite:** A portion of the WPA mural *City Life*, by Victor Arnautoff, inside San Francisco's Coit Tower.