

BUILT BY FDR:

How the New Deal Changed the Lay of the Land

BY GRAY BRECHIN

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Ivy periodically covers the tarnished bronze plaque at the San Francisco playground where I swim: IMPROVED BY WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION, 1935–1936. An identical tablet marks the Sloat Avenue entrance to Stern Grove where free summer performances delight thousands. But for the most part, the immense legacy of landscape design created during the half-decade of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal remains unmarked, uncatalogued, and unsung. Within those five or six years, the Bay Area was enriched as it has not been before or since.

During the depths of history’s greatest depression, Roosevelt entered the White House determined to try almost anything to get the economy moving again. With the power of the presidency and a popular mandate, he undertook the regeneration of a substantial portion of North America.

Roosevelt’s alphabet soup agencies — especially the Works Progress Administration (WPA) — produced an avalanche of art, plays, guidebooks, swimming pools, libraries, and airports. His Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) planted thousand-mile windbreaks and entire forests — an estimated three billion trees in all. For the first time, landscape architects were recruited en masse into the public domain and given armies of destitute workers to help change the land.

Roosevelt wanted not only to regenerate the landscape but the society that occupied it. Public design, he hoped, would produce a genuine community too often absent in the competitive life of the United States. “We are definitely in an era of building,” he said, “the best kind of building — the building of great public projects for the benefit of the public and with the definite objective of building human happiness.”

Americans, in short, would be brought together in the landscapes of the New Deal. Financially strapped cities and counties could apply for federal funds and manpower



Bronze Plaque at WPA-built Berkeley Rose Garden. Photograph by Gray Brechin, 2005.

to create parks and playgrounds out of weed-grown lots. Bay Area cities were quick to claim their share of public improvements and try to build for themselves better tomorrows than the Depression’s grim daily present.

Berkeley’s John Hinkel Park at Southampton and San Diego roads was among the first local projects of the new New Deal. In a lovely canyon studded with live oaks, the Civil Works Administration in 1934 built a four-acre park with an intimate Greek amphitheater, trails, and rustic clubhouse. The Berkeley Community Players used the theater for many years and was followed in turn by the popular Berkeley Shakespeare Festival until traffic congestion and the need for more space forced the festival to move east to Orinda. Today, the small theater’s tree-shaded terraces seem more Druidic than Greek.

Decidedly more Hellenic is the Mountain Theater near the summit of Mount Tamalpais. Plans for the vast bowl were drawn up in 1925 by landscape architect



Summer, 2005 Mountain Play performance of “Oklahoma” at CCC-built Mountain Theater, Mount Tamalpais State Park. Photograph by Robert Dawson, 2005.

Emerson Knight, but it was begun only in 1934 with help from the CCC crews building trails and fire breaks on the mountain. While Knight had Delphi in mind, he also hoped to create something distinctively Californian on the spectacular site, and so left oaks and rock outcroppings to block some sight lines. Work crews used winches to hoist two-ton boulders into place, creating broad stone terraces. Seating 6,000, the Mountain Theater has as its backdrop a 70-mile panorama of bay and hills. It has served for decades as a summer venue of pageants and musicals, attracting regional crowds up the winding roads and trails of the mountain. A recently placed plaque commemorates the CCC workers who toiled for nearly four years on the theater.

As the CCC wrapped up its work on the Mountain Theater, WPA work crews began another amphitheater across the Bay in the Oakland hills. Gertrude Mott, wife of former Oakland mayor Frank Mott, led the California Writers’ Club to champion an “Open-Air Theater and Temple of Honor” dedicated to the state’s past and future writers. Theater and temple were to be sited on land once owned by poet Joaquin Miller but acquired for one of the new East Bay Regional Parks. What is now known as Woodminster took shape on Miller’s land between 1938 and 1940.

Woodminster includes an open-air theater designed by Edward Foulkes. Home to festivals and plays during the summer, one approaches the 1500-seat amphitheater via a series of symmetrical stone ramps, terraces, and stairs that flank a cascade whose waters spring from the base of the stage’s backwall. Titanic Moderne figures embellish the wall.



WPA-built Woodminster Amphitheater looking towards San Francisco Bay, Joaquin Miller Regional Park, Oakland hills. Photograph by Robert Dawson, 2004.

Woodminster is thus far more than a mere amphitheater. Landscape architect William Penn Mott, Jr. (director of the National Park Service under President Reagan) created an environmental ensemble fusing images from Italy and California. The cascade falls through groves of redwoods and olives to a circular fountain which once erupted with auroral displays visible throughout the Bay Area.. Operated from an electrical console, the fountain could produce almost 1,300 different lighting combinations.

As Woodminster took shape, WPA workers were completing another amphitheater with spectacular views — for rosebushes. In a slide-prone canyon judged unsafe for houses, landscape architect Vernon Dean created an open bowl of stone-walled terraces surmounted by a 220-foot semicircular pergola and beds for 4,000 roses. The Berkeley Municipal Rose Garden in Codornices Park remains a place of unabashed and joyous romance, a favored venue for quiet reading, sunset watching, and al fresco weddings.

The ‘thirties fashion for cabbage-flowered chintz and wallpaper suggests that roses enjoyed high esteem and, sure enough, municipal rose gardens blossomed across the nation as public relief projects. Oakland attempted to outdo Berkeley by using funds from the State Emergency Relief Administration.

In an overgrown canyon off Grand Avenue, landscape architect Arthur Cobbleddick laid out a formal garden inspired by those of Florence and Rome. A slightly jogged main axis extends up the ravine from a curved colonnade at the dead end of Jean Street. Halfway



Two views of the Berkeley Municipal Rose Garden in Codornices Park, Berkeley, CA. Left: WPA crews completing construction, c. 1938, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD. Right: photograph by Gray Brechin, 2005.

up, a cascade descends at an almost right angle from a terraced amphitheater ringed with Italian stone pines, to a formal pool and stucco loggia. What is now the Morcom Amphitheater of Roses — with its sophisticated orchestration of stonemasonry, ironwork, forest, and 5,000 rosebushes — silences all those tired jokes about Oakland. There is a there there and it, like the Berkeley Rose Garden, is heavily booked for weddings and parties throughout the year.

In San Francisco, WPA crews were again building what the city couldn't afford. Decades of lobbying, planning, and voting for an Aquatic Park at the foot of Van Ness Avenue had come to little when the WPA decided, on December 19, 1935, to undertake the project. In four years, its workers converted a polluted, rubble-strewn waterfront into a streamlined marvel of beaches, bleachers, gardens, dressing rooms, and a concrete bathhouse inspired by ship design.

Thousands swarmed to Aquatic Park on warm days. The bleachers served as yet another gigantic amphitheater, this one for the spectacle of bathers, boats, and the bay itself. The WPA allotted a generous budget for art, lavishly embellishing the sleek bathhouse with fine murals, tilework, and sculpture by Hilaire Hiler, Sargent Johnson and Beniamino Bufano. Writer Henry Miller praised Hiler's exuberant mural of underwater life and sunken ruins: "Though the decor was distinctly Freudian, it was also gay, stimulating, and superlatively healthy."

Billed by WPA officials as a "Palace of the Public," the public soon found itself excluded from enjoying the bathhouse. Eager to turn a profit on the federal

government's largesse, city officials leased the new building to concessionaires who demanded costly changes to accommodate their restaurant and nightclub, then posted PRIVATE signs to keep schoolboys off the Deco decks. The WPA accordingly ceased work on the park,



WPA-built Oakland Municipal Rose Garden. Photograph by Robert Dawson, 2004.



WPA-built Aquatic Park casino, San Francisco. Photograph by Robert Dawson, 2004.

turning the incomplete project over to the city on January 22, 1939. Aquatic Park remains incomplete, though it has fared somewhat better under the National Park Service as the National Maritime Museum (now known as San Francisco Maritime Historical Park.).

Even as Aquatic Park and Woodminster Amphitheater were nearing completion at the end of the decade, the programs that had created them were dying. Despite the popularity of Roosevelt's experiments in creative public relief, congressmen, newspaper editors, and columnists relentlessly attacked them as dangerous flirtations with socialism — or worse. Then came World War II, and other priorities.

With remarkable speed, much of the controversial legacy of the New Deal was expunged. Murals and mosaics were painted and stuccoed over, paintings were sold for scrap, and works by artists such as de Kooning, Kline, Gorky, and Bufano were lost or stolen.

Landscapes fared somewhat better due to their uncontroversial nature and the generally high quality of workmanship and materials that went into them. Chiefly, they suffered from lack of maintenance when, for example, WPA-sponsored playground supervisors were eliminated. Woodminster suffered years of neglect before its vandalized lighting, dry cascade, and weedy borders were refurbished.

An old CCC veteran once said to me, "We felt there was someone in Washington back then who cared about the little guy." I still feel that today when I walk through Roosevelt's landscapes. Although their origins are largely

forgotten, the hundreds of thousands who daily use the parks, playgrounds, trails and theaters built during the New Deal unwittingly pay homage to the president who imagined a society regenerated from disaster by compassionate and intelligent design, and the millions of workers who made that vision a reality we enjoy today.