



ARCHITECTURE + MIGRATION
WPA MIGRANT CAMPS
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DUSTBOWL DESIGNS

Federal migrant camps of the Great Depression

Beginning in 1932, the topsoil of the American plains took to the wind and scattered eastward across the country. Decades of sodbusting, mono-cropping and deep furrow plantation had exhausted the fragile soil structure, leaving it vulnerable to drought. When the rains failed in 1931, the earth began to dry up. By 1934, the United States was experiencing its worst drought in history. As the soil desiccated, the fierce winds of the plains gathered tremendous plumes of dust and carried it over millions of square miles. All told, a billion tons of earth moved on devastating farms, wrecking communities and setting in motion the great westward migration of families seeking work.

In response to this ecological catastrophe, the Roosevelt administration reorganised the rural relief effort and charged the Farm Security Administration (FSA) to coordinate a range of housing, credit, health and education programs for farm families, migrants and itinerant workers. As part of an expansive New Deal state, the ultimate goal of the FSA was to democratise land ownership by eradicating rural tenancy. The immediate challenge, however, was to organise temporary shelter for millions of people in motion – the displaced and the dispossessed.

Muskogee, OK, Russell Lee, 1939. Migrants heading west to California. The millions of dislocated people loosed upon the roads by the Dust Bowl alarmed the Roosevelt administration and prompted experiments like the FSA camps. But the communal nature of the camps unfolded in tension with the rugged individualism of migrants, embodied in the private family automobile.

In 1937, the FSA launched a government camp project to provide shelter and services to migrant workers in 15 states, mostly in the West, but also in farm and fishing communities in the Northeast and the South. For many migrants, shelter per se was not the foremost challenge – many families took refuge in their vehicles or in makeshift squatter camps. The main problem was that a lack of stable housing forced them to spend large portions of their income on fuel in order to keep moving. Thus, the FSA would not only supply shelter, but would site camps strategically in order to maximise transportation efficiencies. FSA officials used government trucks to transport workers to agricultural jobs in the areas around the camps. This enabled migrants to spend less on fuel and to retain a larger share of their earnings for essentials.



While shelter was just one part of the larger array of challenges migrants faced, the FSA viewed its provision as a top priority. The Roosevelt administration, Congress, and FSA leadership regarded the unhinged population with alarm, worried that the lack of stability could lead to radicalisation. For government planners and architects, self-built squatter camps that cropped up across the country presented an ungovernable landscape full of moral and physical danger, magnifying the already dire conditions of the Great Depression. They argued that only the rational delivery of modern shelter units in sufficient numbers could draw people out of their makeshift interstitial communities.

To build the camps, the FSA liaised with the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and other federal relief agencies. With primary responsibility to construct dams, bridges, hospitals, post offices, and other government buildings, a great deal of architectural and engineering talent was concentrated in the WPA. The CCC maintained an in-house staff of land surveyors, planners and road builders because of its work in constructing state parks, fire roads, retreat camps and other rural facilities. By the end of the decade, the FSA had built up its own stable of architects, engineers, planners and surveyors, managed by a vertical system of national directors, regional administrators, and local camp officials.

The FSA deployed a range of measures to scale up design and construction of the migrant camps. Rather than hire one architect or firm for every project, the FSA retained a pool of architects to develop standardised plans around a limited and uniform program of building. While the FSA contracted with private construction companies to build the camps, it retained control of the supply chain of materials in order to reduce costs and speed production. Civil engineers moved from site to site in order to oversee the surveillance, grading, utility installation and other site preparations. Many camp services were delivered through mobile rather than stationary means, including dental and health clinics installed in manufactured structures and mounted on trailers.

In general, the FSA favored modular, functionalist design, reflected in the work of some of its most well-known staff, such as landscape architect Garret Eckbo, architect Vernon de Mars and civil engineer Nicholas Cirino. FSA camps attracted notice from modern architecture circles, including the influential *Pencil Points* architectural journal, which devoted an entire issue in 1942 to the camps.



Yamhill Migratory Labor Camp, Dayton, OR. Photographer unknown, 1939. FSA camps varied by region as well as by the approaches of the architects, engineers, and construction firms involved. But all camps bore the powerful signature of modern new town planning and rigorous design control popular with the New Deal state.

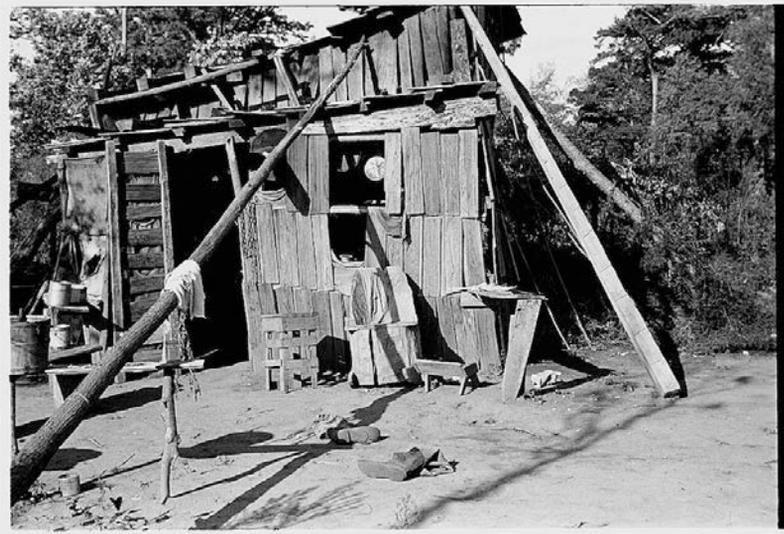
Most camp buildings were wood frame clad either in canvas, wood or metal. In some regions, architects made attempts at vernacular design adaptations. Camp Osceola in Florida, for example, featured small porches and low-angle gables on stilt-raised residential buildings not unlike local houses, while community facility buildings in Texas and California were often open to the air; camps in Arizona used adobe for wall construction. But most camps rose up according to a set of centralised codes and specifications meant to accelerate the process of construction and multiply the number of sites in the pipeline. This centralisation of design led to such follies as tin roofs in Texas and metal cladding in Florida, forcing residents out of their units in the long summers.

As federal architects and civil engineers sited, planned and constructed the camps, the Head of the FSA Information Division, Roy Stryker, dispatched twenty-two photographers throughout the country to document the effort. He employed many of the top photographers in the United States, including Dorothea Lang, Jack Delano, Gordon Parks, Ben Shahn, Marion Post Wolcott, Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, Russell Lee and Marjory Collins. He supplied his photographers with 'scripts' describing the range of subjects and treatments deemed appropriate to the purpose. These photographers left a detailed visual record of the camps, with tens of thousands of unique images.

FSA photographs depict rural families adapting to life far from their Kansas and Oklahoma farms. Planners organised each camp on some variant of an orthogonal grid surrounding a public square, a landscape condition largely alien to the residents' experience of rural agricultural life in the Midwest and Great Plains. People shared water sources and bathing facilities, recreation spaces and dining halls. In many of the camps, the FSA operated co-operative stores, day care centres, adult education classes, libraries, health clinics and kitchens. Architects invariably sited camp manager offices next to the gates in order to enhance surveillance.

And yet, these images of the architecturally uniform and rigorous camps belie the fragility and transience of their condition. With the 1940 elections, the political winds in Congress shifted against bold federal experiments such as the migrant camps. The entry of the United States into World War II in 1941 absorbed millions of migrants into the military and defence production force. In 1943, Congress shifted all migrant relief programs into the more conservative and narrowly conceived War Food Administration in the Labor Department. By the conclusion of the war, the federal camp program was shuttered.

In the end, the camps presented highly ambivalent landscapes. They were less communities than collections of strangers, coming and going at intervals, forming rapid but tenuous connections amid dire circumstances. The architecture itself expressed this ambivalence. On the one hand, camp planning and organisation spoke of a tentative optimism in the provision of the public good. On the other, it expressed the aims of government through modular and temporary construction suited to the immediate provision of shelter, but less suited to the broader goal of the New Deal to remake American democracy. The camps had sprung up amid volatile political and economic forces – by the time the government had constructed a sizable network of camps, federal priorities had shifted to the war effort. Migrants disappeared into factories and defence housing springing up in cities; construction materials flowed out of FSA warehouses and into war production. In hindsight, the permanent state of the camps had always been impermanence; they were momentary and ephemeral, much like the dust that drove people westward in the first place.



Arkansas. Ben Shahn, 1935.

Unemployed people squatted marginal land across the country from the very beginning of the Great Depression, but their ranks swelled rapidly with the Dust Bowl. The makeshift architecture of the houses stood in stark contrast to the rationalized shelter offered in the FSA camps.



Marysville Camp, CA. Dorothea Lange, 1935.

Some migrant camps, such as Marysville in California and Rupert in Idaho, were built earlier by the Civilian Conservation Corps. State officials appropriated this Marysville tourist camp for use by migrant workers two years in advance of the FSA program. With its giant legacy trees, log gate, and frame cottages, the camp was designed with permanence in mind.



Tulare County, CA. Russell Lee, 1939.

Overhead view of an FSA cooperative warehouse supply yard. The FSA controlled its own supply chain, stockpiling precut, prefabricated, and modular components for use in camp construction.

Calipatria, CA. Dorothea Lange, 1939.

FSA Camp Calipatria housed 155 migrant families who moved more frequently for seasonal harvests. Residents lived in wood framed tents wrapped in sturdy burlap canvas. Mobile amenities, such as the dental clinic in the trailer at right, moved between a group of camps in the region to deliver services. The trailer on the left housed the camp manager.



Caldwell, TX. Russell Lee, 1939.

At FSA Camp Caldwell, architects designed a beautiful multiuse facility out of precut structural materials, corrugated metal roof, and plywood floors and walls. The building served as an auditorium, community center, meeting hall, and movie house.



Westley, CA. Dorothea Lange, 1939.

One of the early and largest of the FSA camps, Westley housed up to 200 families and as many individual travellers at a time. It functioned as a small town, with its own water tower, plumbing and electric grids. Architects made a nod toward the California vernacular with the overhanging porch.





Westley, TX. Dorothea Lange, 1939.

The elegant pole and rafter outbuilding, open to the warm Texas air, houses the communal laundry facility beneath a corrugated metal roof. Arrayed in the background is a regiment of prefabricated modular houses for families.



Harlingen, TX. Arthur Rothstein, 1942.

Most camps had one or more facilities related to children, including day care centers, playgrounds, story readings, and kindergartens. Rothstein's photograph emphasizes the rational application of simple, modern, unadorned mass construction techniques.



Sinton, TX. Arthur Rothstein, 1942.

In the early 1940s, with more concentrated design talent and less oversight from Washington, FSA officials grew bolder in their deployment of High Modern architecture. The residential structure at FSA Camp Sinton pictured at right could have come from the drawing board of the Bauhaus.