

# **The Living New Deal:**

## **A Growing Work In Progress**

**October 2011**

### **Origins and Purpose**

The Living New Deal began eight years ago as a book project by Dr. Gray Brechin on the WPA in California, but it quickly outgrew the original intent as the vast extent of New Deal public works projects became clear. The project expanded into a team effort to inventory, map, and interpret how Franklin Roosevelt's initiatives radically modernized California. In 2007, the California Living New Deal Project was officially launched under the direction of Gray Brechin, Project Scholar, and Professor Richard Walker, Principal Investigator. This was done in partnership with the California Historical Society, which helped provide visibility with historians, and the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment at the University of California, Berkeley, where the technical side of the project was developed and housed. Financial support came from grants by the Columbia Foundation and the IRLE.

The first order of business was to construct an interactive website that could accommodate a range of data on New Deal public works sites – photographs, site information, historic documents, personal accounts, etc. – and allow users to access that data through Google maps. An elegant website, constructed by programmers at the IRLE, has served us well (<http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu/>). An outreach director, Lisa Ericksen, was hired and she organized workshops in 2008-09 to recruit volunteers from local historical societies to submit data on sites around the state. Graduate research assistants, Lindsey Dillon and Shaina Potts, filtered and entered the data, starting in early 2009. Two years later, the database has passed a landmark of 1000 New Deal sites across California. The database and website are now hosted by the UC Berkeley Department of Geography.

Far from an antiquarian exercise, the Living New Deal has only grown more timely because of the recent worldwide economic crisis, which has invited so many comparisons with the Great Depression of the 1930s as well as calls for similar government programs to revive the economy and relieve the severe unemployment and financial suffering of millions of Americans. In late 2010, the decision was made to extend the project to the whole country: to inventory, map, and publicize the achievements of the New Deal and its public works to the entire nation. This, we knew, would require a rapid scaling up of the Living New Deal, its web presence, the project team and project financing.

### **The Growing Team**

The Living New Deal team has grown rapidly of late, in preparation for launching the national survey. Project advisor Harvey Smith is President of the National New Deal Preservation Association, which is now partnering with the Living New Deal; he provides key links to other New Deal organizations around the country. Attorney Terry

Diggs has researched potential partnerships and conferences for expanding our contacts and reach, and she is advising us on ways of connecting to local informants and allies in the middle of the country. Retiree Jane Eiseley is researching CCC works in California and Wisconsin, and civil engineering undergraduate Michael Metz is surveying professional journals for articles on New Deal public works. Berkeley doctoral students Samuel Redman and Janaki Srinivasan have recently joined the team, Redman to help with gathering oral histories from New Deal veterans and Srinivasan to ferret out dissertations on New Deal public works. Former Berkeley City Council member Ying Lee Kelly will be blogging for the project and Napa Community College lecturer Lauren Coodley will be in charge of book reviews and a New Deal bibliography on the website. Retired professor and New Deal authority Robert Leighninger is anxious to start work on building the national map.

### **Improved Website, Revised Mission**

In Summer 2010, the Living New Deal website moved to the Department of Geography at UC Berkeley, where it is a featured project: (<http://geography.berkeley.edu>). With current grant funds, we hired computer programmer Ben Hass to redesign the website in order to make it more user-friendly, include more New Deal resources, and expand its database and mapping capabilities from California to the entire United States. Haas has worked closely with consultant Susan Ives, who was brought on to the Living New Deal team to help develop an effective communications and outreach strategy. Ives was hired with the help of the National New Deal Preservation Association, which received a LEF Foundation grant that had as one of its objectives to support the national New Deal inventory.

A necessary step in revising the website has been to rethink our mission as we go national. The Living New Deal is not only meant to create a national inventory of New Deal public works, we wish to be active in securing the future of New Deal sites and encouraging local communities to mark, publicize and protect their New Deal heritage. Furthermore, we want to be a national clearinghouse for current debates about the need for a *new* New Deal to rebuild America's infrastructure, civic buildings and public spaces and put this country back to work. The new website will also provide a much clearer introduction to the Living New Deal than before, do a better job of drawing people in to become adherents who actively follow New Deal news through us, and make it easier to learn about how to contribute data and make financial contributions (including on-line).

### **Publicity & Outreach**

The Living New Deal has sparked a great deal of interest and received a large amount of favorable publicity, especially as the recent economic downturn and rising unemployment has invited comparisons with how the Roosevelt administration dealt with a similar crisis. Gray Brechin and Richard Walker have been frequent guests on programs on local radio stations, such as KGO, KPFA, KQED and KALW. In addition, Gray Brechin did a 2008 segment on the PBS News Hour on New Deal art. We have gotten a host of newspaper articles on the project or that mention the Living New Deal in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Contra Costa Times*, and others. A thick scrapbook of news articles is available on request, and several of the articles are posted on the project

website. Susan Ives and Terry Diggs have plans to improve our outreach through social media, including an email newsletter, website blog and Living New Deal Facebook page.

### **Public Presentations**

In the past year, Gray Brechin has given New Deal talks at a variety of venues, including the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park (broadcast by C-Span), the USS *Potomac* for its docents, the Long Beach History Museum, San Francisco History Association, Hofstra University, the San Francisco and Fremont public libraries, and several retirement homes. He will be presenting a New Deal talk for the Twentieth Century Heritage Society and National Trust of Australia in Sydney in November. Harvey Smith has spoken at Cal State Los Angeles, community college and high school classes, and for historical societies. He also gave a popular course on New Deal art and public works for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. Smith and Brechin collaborated to give their annual New Deal bus tour of San Francisco for this year's LaborFest in April. Brechin also won the Oscar Lewis Award from the San Francisco History Association for his New Deal work.

### **Exhibitions & Workshops**

Harvey Smith curated two exhibitions this year: "The 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the WPA in Berkeley" at the Berkeley Historical Society and "The American Scene: New Deal Art, 1935-1943" at Walnut Creek's Leshner Center for the Arts. The latter show included 160 seldom-seen art works culled from museum and private collections. Smith then curated another exhibit at San Francisco's Canessa Park Gallery which combined portions of both of the previous exhibits and featured public discussions of the role of government sponsorship. These exhibitions provide models of what other communities can do to make local New Deal accomplishments better known.

Richard Walker organized a one-day conference at Berkeley on October 29, 2010, with leading scholars from around the United States comparing the context and efficacy of President Roosevelt's stimulus programs with those of President Obama. Participants included such leading economists, sociologists and historians as Barry Eichengreen, Brad DeLong, Robert Reich, Robert Johnson, Kirstin Downey, Margaret Weir, and Dean Baker. The proceedings are available at: <http://www.irlle.berkeley.edu/conference/2010/>.

### **Publications**

In 2010, we issued a study of the beneficial effects of the New Deal in treating the Great Depression, underwriting postwar American growth, and building up the state of California. Richard Walker and Gray Brechin, *The Living New Deal: The Unsung Benefits of the New Deal for the United States and California* is available on-line at: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/6c1115sm>.

We published several editorials in newspapers, including the London *Guardian*:

G. Brechin. "The Fading Genius of the U.S. Post Office." UK *Guardian*, August 2, 2011.  
G. Brechin. "New Deal's Legacy in Danger of Being Ruined," San Francisco *Chronicle*, March 26, 2011

G. Brechin. "Decades-Old Model of S.F. Needs A Home." San Francisco *Chronicle*, February 26, 2011.

M. Bennett & R. Walker, "Present Crisis Shows the Need for New Deal", Santa Rosa *Press Democrat*, October 15, 2011.

We also presented papers at a conference titled "1935" at Hofstra University, which are pending publication:

Brechin, Gray. "There Was An Alternative: The New Deal's Educational Initiatives During the Great Depression — And the Poverty of Our Own"

Smith, Harvey. "The Monkey Block: The Art Culture of the New Deal in the San Francisco Bay Area."

### **Fundraising Initiatives**

A national Living New Deal will require much greater funding than the California project. We need to hire a project manager, who will be a post-doctoral scholar housed in the Geography Department at the University of California, Berkeley. We will need to contract with scholars at colleges and historical associations around the country in order to oversee data gathering in all 50 states. And we will need more backup from research assistants and computer programmers at UC Berkeley. All this comes to over \$100,000 per year for two or three years. Our fundraising target is therefore \$250,000.

The Living New Deal project has already raised \$58,000 towards its goal of \$250,000. Funding includes a \$25,000 matching grant from the Robert Chlebowski Trust, \$10,000 from Peter Wiley of Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, \$15,000 from the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, \$8,000 from the LEF Foundation (in concert with the National New Deal Preservation Association) and a \$1000 anonymous gift.

We have engaged the services of Adam Kinsey of Full Cup Consulting to help us in seeking out potential foundation grants and consultant Susan Ives to develop an effective marketing strategy to elicit private gifts. We have incorporated giving into the project website and a link to facilitate smaller online contributions.

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