

Filippo De Dominicis  
**Catastrophe, migration, and modernity: Farm Security  
 Administration settlements in Arizona and California**

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Abstract

The paper offers a brief critical reading of the resettlement efforts undertaken by the Farm Security Administration in the aftermath of the disastrous sandstorms that struck the southern Great Plains of the United States. Looking at the evolution of planning strategies between design, planning and landscape, the essay questions the adaptability and ambiguity of modern architecture as a tool of community planning and, at the same time, of control, in the aftermath of one of the greatest catastrophes the U.S. rural world had ever experienced; and beyond clichés and appraisals expressed by the specialized press of those years.

Keywords

Farm Security Administration — Vernon DeMars — Dust Bowl

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In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck (1939) gives an exemplary account of the relationship between rural southerners in the United States and their land. A relationship that they had established through generations of labor and harvesting; and that in the span of a decade they would unwittingly compromise. Nature, and other men, would do the rest.

As a result of the disastrous phenomenon known as the Dust Bowl – a series of sandstorms that struck the Great Plains in the south of the United States in the mid-1930s, which culminated on the so-called Black Sunday, April 14, 1935 – more than two hundred and fifty thousand farmers from Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas were deprived of their employment and forced to move westward.

In the years that preceded the catastrophe, those farmers had been dispossessed of their properties by the investment companies they had turned to in the early *Dirty Thirties* in order to withstand losses due to an incipient drought. This was the beginning of a short circuit of facts and events that would lead to disaster. The sharecropping regime imposed by the entry of lending institutions, combined with the need to increase the profit, led to a significant intensification of cultivation which resulted, in turn, into a substantial reduction in vegetation cover. As a consequence of poor farming practices, the most superficial layer of soils began to impoverish and loose cohesion, becoming pulverized. Weathering triggered by anthropogenic factors, then, was further reinforced by climatic events, with cyclonic phenomena following the period of drought that multiplied erosion processes. As winds strengthened, dust turned into sandstorms with increasing frequency, undermining the fragile ecological balance that governed the southern Great Plains (Lee and Gill 2015). The destruction wrought



**Fig. 1**

View of the field in Shafter, CA (from *Architectural Forum*, January 1941).

by the storms prompted land-owning institutions to evict farming families, paving the way to the ultimate mechanization of farming processes. The man on the tractor replaced all those households that had each taken care of their own piece of land, struggling against a hostile nature and building communities in spite of the distance that separated each house from the other. They were told to leave. The houses of those who resisted, light wooden shelters resting on the long undulations of the land, were destroyed or made uninhabitable. With no alternative, a large number of Americans were forced to do what they had always done: look westward and migrate in search of a frontier.

What took place in the second half of the 1930s between the Great Plains and California is one of the most incredible stories of resettlement that modernity has ever experienced. It is a story that stems from a series of catastrophic events largely due to anthropogenic causes and that plunges its roots in the complete absence of the urban element. The great migration following the Dust Bowl, in fact, originates in the desolated lands of the South and ends in the fertile areas of California's Central Valley. In this perspective, this story is inherently linked to the rural environment and its temporality. Not coincidentally, the seasonality and the consequent rotation of workers will be two of the key aspects informing the entire resettlement project. But this story is also eminently modern. As claimed by Vernon DeMars (1992), the villages built to rehouse migrants materialized the dream of a large-scale modern housing project, an endeavor that the United States had not yet known at that time (Bauer 1933). Because of its unprecedented size, the effort of Vernon DeMars, Garrett Eckbo and Fran Violich – just to mention the best known of the designers involved in the operations – was meant to fill this gap, combining the typical features of the American debate with the principles of the new architecture already affirmed by Le Corbusier, and paving the way for those global reflections on community planning that would characterize much of the postwar discourse<sup>1</sup>.

In 1937 the issue of southern migrants was taken over by a new federal agency within the Department of Agriculture, the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The establishment of the FSA put an end to the multitude



**Fig. 2**

View of residential blocks in Chandler, AZ, 1939 (Library of Congress).

**Fig. 3**

The location and typology of Farm Security Administration settlements in California (Series I, subseries 1, Documentary Files (1914-1939), Box 1.1/10, file "VIII E3, Labor, 1937-1942", USDA History Collection, Special Collections, National Agricultural Library. Accessed August 19, 2022, <https://www.nal.usda.gov/exhibits/speccoll/items/show/1101>).

of sporadic initiatives that had characterized the previous three years. At the same time, it resulted in the full acknowledgement of a national and hitherto essentially invisible housing demand. A demand that the FSA's predecessor, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads of the Resettlement Administration, had begun to seize (Ghirardo 1989) and then reveal through a very detailed photographic record produced by the group of Roy Stryker, Arthur Rothstein and Dorothea Lange<sup>2</sup>. The FSA's direction was clear from the outset - although some initial, understandable wavering. For resettlement operations, the agency allocated a dedicated program. Its first goal, in terms of time, had been to provide material assistance by setting up a light infrastructural support where each family could arrange a first shelter. At the same time, however, it appeared increasingly urgent to put in place some basic organizational conditions to reestablish the times and ways of community life (Ghirardo 1989). This secondary objective – which raised in response to the increasing forms of spontaneous aggregation and upheaval enacted by rural migrants – will indelibly mark the evolution of the FSA's operations, orienting its settlement policies toward a model which owed to both the early transit camps and the greenbelts of the East Coast. A decisive contribution to the development of this strategy will come from the young members of the so-called IX Region, the FSA's design department based in San Francisco: amongst them, Vernon DeMars, Fran Violich and Garrett Eckbo, three recently graduated practitioners who were taking the first steps in the public sector. The group had been asked to provide an immediate solution for a problem whose contours were still rather blurred. What was certain about the people arriving from Oklahoma, Arkansas and neighboring states was that they had been deprived of their land and any means of livelihood necessary to survive. Thrown out the door by mechanization, they were nothing but an invisible mass coming west in search of a second life. They had brought with them all stuffs had failed to sell aboard old crates they had turned into their home for months. Awaiting them was not stability, or an acre of land, but an uncertain future as salaried harvester exposed to the logic of the capital and the unpredictability of seasonal rotation. For this reason, at least initially, their means of transportation would continue to serve as a dwelling. Though eradicated from the soil where they were born and though deprived of the utopia of broadacre, the migrants from the Great Plains will succeed in surviving thanks to the same factor that had ousted them from society, that is mech-

**Fig. 4**

Aerial view of Yuba City, CA, taken between 1935 and 1942 (Library of Congress).

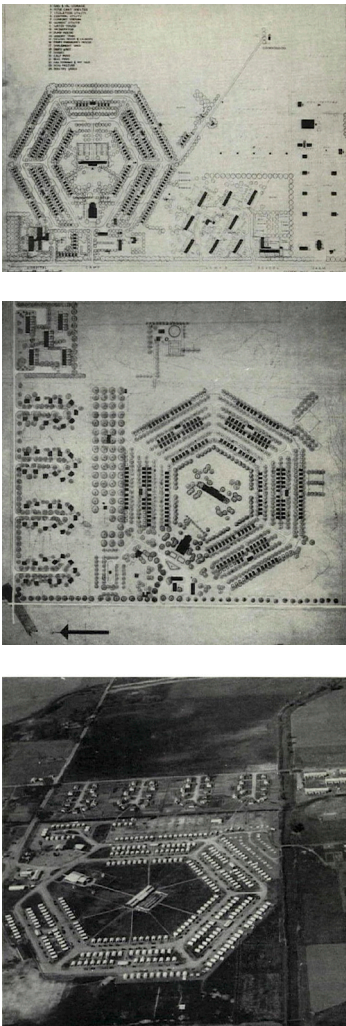


anization. In other words, they survived thanks to the availability of a *gizmo*, an outboard device that made a space habitable (Banham 1965a). In the case of the labor migrants, the situation was so dramatic that the *gizmo* itself would serve as home, in accordance with the trend Reyner Banham (1965b) will elect as an emblem of the rise of the American modernity. In this sense, the story of the labor migrants is fully inscribed in that of the American modernity, and would be treated as such in the early design explorations of the IX Region.

The group's early initiatives were characterized by different, somehow episodic solutions, as if to test the nature of a terrain whose actual consistency was substantially unknown. Nonetheless, dissimilar as they might appear, these attempts all shared a common understanding: all of them, in fact, had to provide answers in line with places, people and the activities they would be doing, in the shortest time possible. Such typically modern requirements urged the group to act likewise and develop projects according to few but intrinsically rational tenets: the adoption of a functional layout, the respect for climatic data and the concern for production. These three points were put in place consistently and, most importantly, thanks to the systematic interaction of design, planning and landscape competences. At a first look, this was the real innovative element. DeMars (1992) himself dwelt upon that at length, identifying all the key steps in the story during an extraordinary account of those years.

Following a chronological sequence, the first step refers to the design of a cooperative center in Chandler, Arizona, and involves the building scale. In Chandler, one of the FSA's earliest interventions, the group devised a solution with permanent dwellings. The goal was to build a true arena for cooperative actions, with places for public discussions, some multistorey units and a portion of farmland for each family. Such a layout was not even comparable to the first project DeMars had worked on, the Weedpatch transit camp near Arvin, California. Weedpatch is the place described by Steinbeck (1939) in *The Grapes of Wrath*. It consisted in a framework of a few essential services that allowed each family to park its vehicle and set

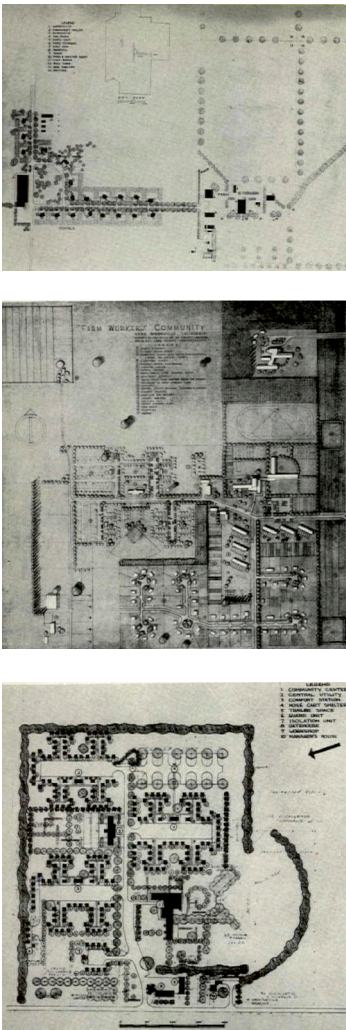




**Fig. 5 a-b-c**

Floor plans and views of settlements on hexagonal matrix: Eleven Mile Corner, AZ, and Tulare, CA (from Pencil Points, November 1941)

up its tent nearby. In its essentiality, the solution proposed in Weedpatch – and later in Shafter – disclosed all the contradictions of the relationship between rural Americans and their dwelling. No matter how attached they were to the land and its elements – ditches, trees, relief – their home was always something akin to a lightweight shell ready to be moved across an open-air space, being the latter the true theater of the American epic. Steinbeck's *Toads* themselves had been the protagonists of a similar episode, when they stole half of a neighbor's abandoned abode, cutting it down and dragging it a couple of miles up and down the hills until they attached it to their own house. Over the years and due to technical advancements, this trend progressed to the point where the *gizmo*, the tool that activated the domestic space, also became the device that could move it. Poverty and the need to cope with it stressed this trend till the extreme: properly equipped, the vehicle could temporarily turn into a home<sup>3</sup>, and the settlement into a fabric of parking stalls (Banham 1965a, 1965b). At Chandler, the design team combined Weedpatch's achievements with a second and still partially unexplored theme<sup>4</sup>. In the Arizonian camp, in fact, the area dedicated to transit will be associated with cooperative services and multi-family residential blocks, the latter strongly characterized in terms of spatial distribution and construction. The introduction of additional dwelling types originated from the strong communitarian attitude of labor migrants. The acknowledgement of such a communitarian dimension represented a key step in the evolution of the FSA's strategies, which began to associate early relief operations with increasingly frequent community planning operations. In this perspective, therefore, it is not surprising that settlements in Chandler, Casa Grande or Glendale, AZ, all present the characteristics of a modern colony; a *siedlung* in which the evolution of the form making – that is the way of producing and designing architecture – parallels with a real ambition for social advancement: in other words, what Robert Tugwell had defined «a renewed alliance between farmer and worker» (Carlebach 1988). From the load-bearing framework in adobe to the distribution of rooms, from the presence of private gardens to the extreme attention to detail, everything speaks of a profound meditation around the economy and functionality of the solutions adopted, specific and at the same time adaptable to changing programs and circumstances, both in environmental and productive terms. But Chandler, however, also speaks of the attempt to provide more than a simple shelter. In the aftermath of the trip to Europe and the discovery of the architecture of Gropius and Le Corbusier, DeMars (1992) affirmed that he wanted to remake Chandler in San Joaquin, CA, adapting the solutions already developed in Arizona to the climate of the hot but fertile Californian valleys. By 1938, in fact, the heart of FSA's design activity had again shifted to California, the state where the agency would direct the most of its efforts. The plans for Tulane and Yuba City – already begun by Fran Violich before 1938 and completed on his return from Europe by DeMars – epitomized this ambition to adaptation, with the massive adobe buildings replaced by slender buildings raising on thin *pilotis*. On the contrary, much of the ingenious distribution and ventilation devices already designed for Arizona remained substantially unchanged, testifying to a rigorous yet flexible rationality, free of any linguistic preference. Neither the emergence of new buildings types nor the adaptive possibilities these buildings offered, however, fully answered the question of social evolution. Indeed, with the consolidation of instances of community planning, the role of the settlement layout grew to become the central



**Fig. 6 a-b-c**

Plans of settlements on orthogonal matrix: Mineral King, CA, Woodville, CA, and Harlingen, TX (from Pencil Points, November 1941).

element of the group's reasonings, not without contradictions.

After Chandler, almost all settlements were planned as twofold structures: one half was for permanent workers, housed in the residential blocks re-adapted from Chandler's model; the other half instead housed seasonal laborers, for whom architects foresaw first metal cabins provided by the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, then small *garden cottages* designed at the first retrofit of the Weedpatch camp in 1938 (Hise 1995). While the residential blocks were arranged parallel to each other, oriented according to seasonal breezes, the units for seasonal workers were attested on either side of a double-loaded hexagonal strip. In the center of the hexagon stood the main services and the camp manager's house. Community buildings, large and flexible structures intended to accommodate the residents' assemblies alternately occupied the center or the side of the hexagon facing the area of multifamily dwellings. On the reasons for the hexagonal figure, De Mars (1992) expressed himself in rather simple terms: while the central plan was however preferable because of technical issues related to water supply and disposal, the hexagon had been chosen as an alternative to the circle because it was easier to trace on the ground<sup>5</sup>. Yet, the answer given by DeMars did not exhaust the reasons for a figure whose use was dictated first and foremost by social implications. The hexagon of Tulane and Yuba City, in fact, was nothing more than a surveillance device, a pan-optic structure enabling the director – or the assembly, when positioned in the center – a constant monitoring over the entire camp (Ghirardo 1989). The concentric structure, then, introduced an additional and increasingly layered system of relations. In fact, the greater the level of impermanence of the housing units – substantially corresponding to the different modes of access to the labor market – the greater their distance from the center of the settlement. Such a distance was to play a key role in the level of community integration of each resident (Hise 1995). In this sense, and despite the repeated accusations of corporatism that the authority would suffer (Carlbach 1988), the spatial order imposed by the FSA reflected all the ambiguities of a non-egalitarian idea of community, however depending upon the rationale of the labor market and light-years far from those aggregative forms that labor migrants had put in place both during their journey westward and during their previous life in the southern Great Plains (Steinbeck 1939).

The ultimate evolution in settlement design, with the abandonment of the hexagonal matrix and the extensive use of the European *zeilenbau*, represented a definitive and significant turn toward an urban-like structure. This evolution, however, was only seemingly alien to purposes of control. Firebaugh and Woodville were the first camps designed as small new towns. The double system of Tulane and Yuba City was replaced by a more varied orthogonal layout, with farmland, townhouses and garden cottages embedded into a plot of amenities that were planned to also attract nonresidents<sup>6</sup>. Landscape design, implemented by a young Garrett Eckbo, acted as a further and ultimate layer, overlaying the plots and defining those spaces that buildings, alone, were unable to characterize. On a par with the architecture, his proposals intercepted both functional aspects and issues related to the construction of the communitarian dimension (Treib and Imbert 1997; Metta 2021). With his selective planting operations, he not only offered protection from the sun and wind, but he also enclosed spaces and suggested visual continuities, mitigating that sense of impermanence and control





**Fig. 7**

View of metal shelters in Woodville, CA, 1942 (Library of Congress).

that any camp was bound to convey regardless of the relief they could bring<sup>7</sup>. In 1942, however, that attempt at mitigation turned into a definitive act of isolation, demonstrating the ambiguity of an operation that contemporary critics would always omit, and that not even the effort of talented designers such as DeMars and Eckbo had been able to dissolve<sup>8</sup>. Called to deal with the design of internment camps for Japanese prisoners, again on behalf of the FSA, DeMars and Eckbo would repropose the solutions already worked out for Firebaugh and Woodville, with a few variations (Treib and Imbert 1997; Horiuchi 2015; Pieris 2016). While it is safe to assume that they attempted to pursue a welcoming and diverse community model on such an occasion as well, it is equally necessary to ask, however, to what extent this same model really sought to establish those new democratic – egalitarian? – spaces to which architectural modernity had promised to give face, and on which it would invest so much in the early post-World War II development decades, this time on a global scale. Neither Talbot Hamlin (1941) – a renowned professor at Columbia and among the earliest disseminators of the FSA experience – nor the group of photo reporters led by Roy Stryker, whose intentions of public outcry had left the field to propaganda precisely during the establishment of the FSA (Carlebach 1988), would ever dwell on these questions. To reporters of the time, instead, the aporia of the FSA's attempt had seemed clear from the outset. Saved by the automobile – which had functioned as a traveling home, taking them all the way to California – the Toads recounted by Steinbeck would experience disintegration in the very aftermath of their arrival. In spite of the prospects for new communities offered by the FSA settlements, many of the labor migrants would remain alone; or they would return home, not before losing touch with even the closest relationships that had accompanied them there.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Francis Violich (1911-2005) had graduated from Berkeley in 1934 and received his Master's degree in City Planning from Harvard and MIT in 1937. Immediately after graduation he had traveled to Europe and Yugoslavia. Vernon DeMars (1908-2005), a 1931 Berkeley graduate, had begun working with the federal agencies in 1934. After working for the National Housing Agency in 1943, he became a professor at MIT in 1947 and then, from 1953, at Berkeley's College of Environmental Design. Garret Eckbo (1910-2000) had graduated from Berkeley in 1935. In 1938 he received his master's degree from Harvard, and from the same year he would begin working for Norman Bel Geddes, author of the General Motors pavilion at the 1939 NY World Fair. Originally in charge of the group was Burton Cairns (1909-1939), who died prematurely in a car accident.

<sup>2</sup> The photo activity, launched by the Resettlement Administration under the leadership of Roy Stryker, was born with a twofold political objective: to raise awareness of the reforms launched by the New Deal and to reassure people that they would be successful.

<sup>3</sup> Maybe, Al Toad's enthusiasm in discovering a fellow who was building a car house resulted precisely from this aspect.

<sup>4</sup> Communitarian issues had already appeared in transit camps such as Weedpatch, but architects did not foresee any common buildings except for services.

<sup>5</sup> According to DeMars, the first settlement on a hexagonal plan is the Wesley field in California, the last one still without a sewer system.

<sup>6</sup> *Garden cottages* were single units consisting of a double room: an enclosed common area and an adjoining sleeping area, open to the veranda. Prior to "Pencil Points," drawings were published in an editorial published by "Architectural Forum" in January 1941.

<sup>7</sup> Unlike colleagues Fran Violich and Vernon DeMars, Garrett Eckbo did not join the project team until 1939.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to being published in "Pencil Points" and "Architectural Forum," both published in 1941, FSA's work was exhibited twice at MoMA. The first, on the occasion of the Wartime Housing exhibition, 1942, the second within Built in USA 1932-1944, in 1944. In both of these circumstances, many of the images published or exhibited, including aerial photographs, were from Dorothea Lange's reportage, specially commissioned by the FSA for propaganda purposes.



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