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SOCIOSPATIAL GENEALOGIES OF WARTIME IMPOVERISHMENT: TEMPORARY FARM LABOUR CAMPS IN THE U.S.A.

Established to develop New Deal resettlement programs in 1937, the United States Farm Security Administration (F.S.A.) was best known for accommodating migratory labour from the drought-stricken central plains. Large numbers arriving in California prompted F.S.A. engineers and architects to develop purpose-designed labour camps and townships, described as early exemplars of community planning. Yet in 1942, when 118,803 Japanese and Japanese Americans were evacuated from the newly created Military Exclusion Zones and incarcerated in relocation centres, F.S.A. skills were put to a different use.

This paper demonstrates how wartime exigency, racist immigration policies and militarisation transformed a model for relief and rehabilitation into a carceral equivalent. It contextualises this transformation within a socio-spatial genealogy of temporary facilities that accommodated mass human displacements – including two examples from California: the Tulare County F.S.A. Camp and the Japanese American Relocation Centre at Manzanar.
Although typically associated with provisional spaces for settlement, education and entertainment, camp environments are increasingly linked with humanitarian relief provision in the face of environmental or manmade catastrophes. They form part of the broader genealogy of power-knowledge relations conceptualised by Michel Foucault with regard to modern institutions, and emulate associated pedagogical and disciplinary programs. This paper examines two contrasting responses to the accommodation of mass human displacements that occurred before and during World War II in the United States of America. It situates them in a comparative and visually discursive spatial genealogy that highlights the instrumental role of spatial planning.

The first of these examples is a progressive social experiment in community building during the 1930s, the Food Security Administration (F.S.A.) camps erected to house racially ‘white’ sharecroppers, tenant farmers and labourers fleeing the drought-stricken south-western plains. An estimated 1.1 million destitute migrants entered California in 1930 alone, evidence of the enormity of the crisis. However, even before the decade-long dust storms devastated their crops, the low productivity of their tenancy-based pattern of agriculture compounded by economic depression prompted state-led programs for rural rehabilitation. They were realised in 1933 with President F.D. Roosevelt’s proposal of a ‘New Deal’.

A raft of laws and presidential executive orders followed and the Resettlement Administration (1935-6) and later the Farm Security Administration (F.S.A., 1937-46) were placed at the helm of agrarian reforms that provided economic relief, advocating forms of collectivism antithetical to the individualism of capitalist enterprise. Spatial programs included subsistence homesteads, greenbelt towns, and permanent and mobile camps for seasonal labour. The purpose-built, community-oriented camp environments that were planned by F.S.A. architects and engineers exemplified enlightened experiments in “relief, rehabilitation and reform”.

In comparison, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 saw the transformation of the camp into a different model for incarcerating Japanese-born resident aliens and Japanese American civilians evacuated from the West Coast military exclusion zones (covering substantial portions of Arizona, California, Oregon and Washington states). A Presidential Executive Order – EO 9066 in February 1942 authorised the evacuation, while a second order EO 9102 in March 1942 appointed the War Relocation Authority (W.R.A.) to oversee the process. This blanket exclusion of culturally Japanese residents (a policy not extended to German or Italian Americans) was a direct consequence of racist immigration policies that denied overseas-born Asian immigrants citizenship and landownership. A population of 118,803 persons was confined, initially in seventeen civilian assembly centres, until later moved to ten relocation centres in remote semi-arid environments across seven states. Each facility was designed to hold around 10,000 persons. Their confinement within fences with sentry towers and searchlights, compulsory loyalty questionnaires, and punitive segregation of dissenters led to the descriptor “concentration camp”. Impoverished by their dislocation, the Japanese American population provided agricultural labour for wartime production.

The F.S.A.’s interest in maintaining agricultural production and their creation through Executive Orders by a President lauded for liberal socially-oriented policies linked these two displacement histories, one progressive and community oriented and the other planned for confinement, yet they were represented very differently by F.S.A.-commissioned photographers like Dorothea Lange, among others. The aesthetics of human trauma captured in photography and novels proved evocative methods for conveying radical political positions with respect to the former. For example, Lange in partnership with agricultural economist Paul Schuster Taylor would present their joint findings to a Senate committee on civil rights violations against immigrant farm workers in 1939. Her iconic and explicitly emotive images of ‘Dust Bowl’ migrants were famously exhibited at the First International Photographic Exhibition in New York’s Grand Central Palace in 1938.
Yet when employed by the W.R.A. along with Clem Albers and Francis Stewart to document the Japanese American Internment Camps, her record of internment was cautious, potentially mindful of W.R.A. censorship suggests Linda Gordon, and her focus was the “respectability, Americanism, work ethic, good citizenship, and achievement of people now being treated as criminals.” While, in Gordon’s view, these photographers conveyed the humiliation of being rationalised, tagged and inoculated; the machinery of incarceration – the fences, gates and sentry towers – and evidence of distress or resistance was excluded from these images. Their failure to represent the deeper emotional distress caused to Japanese or Japanese American evacuees prevented a more explicit critique of the associated societal injustices. The indignities of incarceration were not ameliorated through camp designs.

The F.S.A. Farm Labour Camps

The historic juxtaposition of these utopian and dystopian camp environments amplified those progressive sensibilities that were nevertheless constrained by racist policies and prejudices, ideological positions and fiscal imperatives. In the first instance, programs for social welfare and re-education paralleled efforts at modernising agriculture, alleviating poverty and spearheading economic recovery and were the political context for idealistic experimentation through


camps. A powerful critique of this period, John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, compares F.S.A. camps favourably against the physical accommodation available to itinerant workers. He describes the local hostility, intermittent labour and further impoverishment faced by Depression-era migrants and their accommodation in “rag-tag” squatter towns of “tents, and weed-thatched enclosures, paper houses, a great junk pile...” colloquially known as Hoovervilles. Such towns swelled during picking season to accommodate three to six thousand seasonal workers, their perpetual itinerancy and aerial spatial dislocations capturing twentieth century modernity as experienced by destitute internal migrants rather than progressives.

In contrast, Steinbeck’s account of the Weedpatch camp at Tulare (believed to be the Arvin F.S.A. Camp) suggests the rationalisation of both the camp and its occupants; its orderly, well-kept streets and its central sanitary unit a feature of their re-education into modern standards of living. The Weedpatch camp is fenced in, and has a store, a dance platform, a meeting room, and a management committee; suggesting systems of self-governance concomitant with its modern democratic ethos. In contrast, a third alternative, the company-run camps are described by Steinbeck as exploitative and hostile environments comprising four rows of “little square, flat-roofed boxes, each with a door and a window” and “two men armed with shotguns” guarding each row. The over-priced provisions at the company store which syphoned off the workers’ daily wages revealed the underlying violence of the profit motive. Large growers were threatened by the increasing federal presence and scrutiny of their employment strategies, observes Grey. In comparison, the F.S.A. camp administration was depicted as humanitarian and benevolent.

The relief camps for destitute migrant workers were a small part of the F.S.A.’s grand plan to collectivise agriculture by setting up subsistence farmstead communities, to educate farmers out of debt-cycles, to offer purchase loans and provide health services to farming families. By the War’s end, notes Michael Grey, there were 250 permanent and temporary federal camps. Small farms of 80-300 acres were created next to the permanent facilities, so that “long-term camp-dwellers could rent homes and farm collectively”. Serviced facilities with civic amenities and the shift from tent shelters to cabins were designed to raise this itinerant population from abjection to civility.

This perception was advanced through professional publications such as *Built in the USA 1932-1944* where the F.S.A. camps for agricultural workers exemplified the team work, economy and functionalism of this otherwise “bureaucratic architecture”. The F.S.A. team designed rural labour camps for Arizona, Texas and in particular for California’s Central Valley. The communities planned by the San Francisco office (Regions IX and XI) from 1939-42 were Ceres, Gridley, Winters, Thornton, Westley, Firebaugh, Mineral King, Tulare, Shafter, Arvin, Brawley, Marysville, Yuba City, and Coachella. These were the first experiments in rural public housing in which community buildings expressed Modernist design ideals, exemplified in the simple structures organised in a utopian hexagonal plan at the Tulare County F.S.A. Camp. According to Treib and Imbert, California practitioners Vernon DeMars, Burton D. Cairns and Garrett Eckbo, who were members of the Telesis Environmental Research Group, underscored their New Deal projects with attributes of the Bay Area regional style following a conservative and often sentimental desire to evoke “the perceived stability of prior eras”.

As illustrated in plans and photographs of Tulare found in the architects’ archives, important features of the plan include expansions to an existing school, a permanent utility building (a brick structure) placed at the centre as an organising element and the administrative buildings: the manager’s house, first aid clinic, isolation unit, warehouse, gatehouse and assembly room, which dominate one side of the hexagon. The focus is on laying out the camp environment and designing utility structures, meeting rooms or playgrounds, and in humanising the arid environments through designs by Californian landscape architect, Garrett Eckbo. In contrast, the standardised units available for these settlements frustrated the program’s architects who developed “an architectural ecology of sorts”, note Treib and Imbert, and these ranged from temporary tents, trailers and sheds, to more permanent metal housing and apartment blocks. At Tulare there are rows of Tennessee Coal and Iron cabins serviced by comfort stations, more permanent suburban style two-bedroom units around cul-de-sacs as well as barracks type linear accommodation. (Fig. 3)

The model of community planning devised by the F.S.A. sought to collectivise itinerants of varied European cultural origins who had assimilated into America, where the form, materiality, scale and orientations of structures emphasised community bonds. Prominence given to shared spaces and programs demonstrated the significance of civic spaces for social cohesion. When compared with these enlightened precedents, the regimented barracks designed for Japanese and Japanese American internees seemed geared to strip them of their social relations.
Japanese-American Incarceration

The camps for Japanese and Japanese American evacuees were segregated carceral facilities part of a broader taxonomy of Prisoner of War and civilian internment camps. The first stage of evacuation was to establish seventeen Wartime Civil Control Administration Civilian Assembly Centers, typically accommodated in extant recreational facilities; whilst Justice Department Detention Camps held those suspected of anti-government activities. For example, the military converted the Tulare King’s County Fairground to house 4,978 internees for four months. Nineteen stalls and sheds, formerly used for livestock, were repurposed as accommodation and a further 152 barracks were built by the military. (Fig. 4) An approximately two-metre high perimeter fence, eight watchtowers and a company of 100 military police were assigned to secure the facility, ostensibly from external threat.
The residents of Tulare were from Los Angeles and Sacramento Counties and the Southern California Coast. In nearby Inyo County, the Owens Valley Reception Center at Manzanar (which functioned as a reception centre from March 21 - June 2, 1942 before conversion to a relocation centre) housed a large population from Los Angeles. Converted to a relocation centre under W.R.A. administration, from June 1942 – November 1945, its population peaked at 10,046 persons. Other relocation centres were at Gila River and Poston in Arizona, at Granada, Colorado, at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, at Jerome and Rohwer, in Arkansas, at Minidoka, Idaho, at Topaz, Utah and at Tule Lake, California. They all followed the standardised military grid plan.

The site plans of Manzanar show military style layouts of barracks, mess halls, latrines, dispensary and recreational buildings, hospital, laundry and ironing buildings, garages, pump house and sewage treatment plant. (Fig. 5) The severity of internment and its punitive intention is further conveyed by perimeter fences and sentry towers with search lights. The layout plan at Manzanar reveals 64 rectangular grid blocks, including three zones assigned to fire breaks, with 39 residential blocks, each housing 15 barrack buildings, a mess hall and central utility buildings. The standard approximately 6 x 30.5 metre theatre-of-operations type barracks were divided into six or nine living units or doubled up across the width to form the mess hall. The hospital, the auditorium and industrial/farming areas, the administrative section and the staff and military police quarters deviate from this schema. Yet the monotony of the barrack landscape was socially transformed through internee led community programs – canteen, community hostel, Protestant, Catholic and, Buddhist churches, department store, music hall and co-operatives that were not reflected in the physical planning.

Photographs by Adams, Lange, Albers and Stewart provide an intimate physical record of these community activities at Manzanar, augmented by Toyo Miyatake, a professional Los Angeles photographer who smuggled his camera equipment into the camp. However, their focus on such humanising strategies diverts our attention from how civic deprivation is used to discipline culturally different subjects. The reality of their confinement is poignantly conveyed by Miyatake’s photograph of three boys gazing beyond the boundary fence, one of the most frequently produced image of this incarceration history.

FSA Involvement in Japanese American Incarceration

Lynne Horiuchi, in her revealing critique of F.S.A. activities, highlights these contrasts and their troubling implication in the wartime incarceration of Japanese and Japanese American communities, including F.S.A. involvement in preparing layouts for permanent internment communities. She notes a visit by F.S.A. architects to Manzanar during the early
stage of evacuation in 1942. The team developed site plans for Manzanar and for Gila River, and some features of the latter were adopted by the military. Moreover, Horiuchi notes that prior to 1942, the F.S.A. office had employed two Japanese American architects, Hachiro Yuasa and Siberius Saito, members with these and other prominent architects in the Telesis Environmental Research Group. Both Saito and Yuasa were evacuated and incarcerated in the Tanforan Assembly Centre in the spring of 1942, and later at the Central Utah Relocation Center, she observes. Despite DeMars admitting to being emotionally upset by the evacuation, since the young Japanese American architects were close friends, the architects, like many professionals of the period, remained passive participants in the process: “We thought we ought to make the best of what we felt was a very unfair and unnecessary proposition”.

Horiuchi’s interprets the architects’ passivity as mirroring forms of societal racism embedded in institutional and professional activities; positions particularly hypocritical of a nation championing democracy overseas. Indeed, the fraught social sensitivities of wartime construction played out in many arenas, as illuminated by Jean-Louis Cohen in *Architecture in Uniform*, exposed the profession’s socio-political ambivalence. However, as highlighted by Horiuchi, while their determination to introduce community planning amenities into the camps emulated “the social architecture of F.S.A.’s New Deal community planning”, their most innovative designs were confined to the non-Japanese and non-Japanese American W.R.A. staff members who administered the camps. Unlike the rigid linear geometries of barracks for internees, the F.S.A. staff quarters are diagonally arranged to allow for the diverse planting schemes proposed by Eckbo. Architectural preferences and discrimination as well as the different meanings and associations conveyed through camps across wartime America suggests the volatility of a typology deployed by the same organisations and in similar environments both for social mobility and confinement. The passage of Japanese and Japanese American civilians across these various models are similarly revealing, however their intersections are embedded in a broader labour history.

**Japanese American Farm Labour**

The F.S.A.’s involvement at Manzanar did not include the initial construction of the camp. Its responsibility was for transferring farmlands that had been previously farmed by Japanese and Japanese Americans, and ensuring fair compensation for former owners and correct use of their agricultural land. Evacuation created a vacuum in agricultural production, since nearly two-thirds of the Japanese American workforce depended on agriculture; some 6,118 farms operated by them in the West Coast were valued (at that time) at US $72,600,000 with an estimated US $6 million of equipment. In California, the community dominated the wholesale and retail distribution of fruit and vegetables and the Los Angeles County flower market business. The property loss to the Japanese American community members due to evacuation is estimated to be US $4-5 billion. They were dispossessed, impoverished and reduced to manual workers on the farms associated with the camps. At Manzanar, apart from gardens within the camp planted for local camp consumption, evacuees cleared, planted and irrigated 440 acres for farming vegetables. Additionally due to pressures from producers, the site perimeter became porous to seasonal labour (along with soldiers and college students). Towards the end of 1942, some 10,000 evacuees were on seasonal leave and resettlement was under discussion, contingent however on an internally divisive loyalty review determining further segregation, repatriation, expatriation, enlistment and leave clearance. By December 1944, 31,000 evacuees were on indefinite leave. They were offered US $25.00 and transportation costs.

Consequently, in the latter half of 1942 when war-related industries swelled California’s migrant population there began an inverse Eastward migration of Japanese Americans. Many agro-businesses that were expanding to meet wartime demands actively recruited from the camps and the F.S.A. created or reused extant facilities as mobile farm labour camps. The path to a specific labour camp, Seabrook Farms in New Jersey, which employed some 2,500 Japanese American workers alongside immigrants of other nationalities exemplified this new labour mobility. (Fig. 6) Japanese American evacuees arriving there from the relocation centres describe a Hoover Village comprising four rows of approx. 4.8 x14.6 metre tar-paper roofed, pre-fabricated barracks, with three living units per barrack. It was “just like camp”. But the village had greater physical diversity, including federal housing units; linear, single-storey apartments and dormitories, as well as purpose-built recreational facilities. In short, it responded to various employee groupings with an expanded spatial genealogy reminiscent of F.S.A. labour camps. Despite the harsh climate and gruelling labour (12 hour days farming or at the processing plant), there were greater degrees of spatial agency, community and freedom.
After Camp

Both the F.S.A. farm labour camps and wartime relocation centres were designed for assimilation either of itinerant workers into a new industrial ethos or of a culturally distinct communal collective into Anglo-American values. Both comprised temporary structures and similar material palettes that were transformed by the intention to rehabilitate or punish, and by the desire on the part of authorities to (or not to) provide relief. They illustrated the mutability of the modern spatial template in its most temporary and experimental manifestation of institutionalised freedom or control.

The Japanese American association with camp environments did not end with the defeat of Japan in August 1945. As with the migrants’ passage across a string of camp environments, they too would leave relocation centres for trailer parks and campsites on the urban fringe. There they would struggle to recover properties and rebuild lives. They faced high levels of societal hostility provoked by news of wartime Japanese aggression brought home to the population by returning servicemen.50 There were no cases against them of proven espionage.51 This injustice was suppressed in the aftermath of World War II, while the camps were decommissioned; the suspension or erasure of previously held rights and individual and community identities providing the tabula rasa for assimilation after camp. It took a further four decades for the Japanese American redress movement to gain compensation by which time the physical evidence of their incarceration had disappeared.52 Within the Japanese American community, the term “camp” prompted sentiments of shame, persecution, injustice and emotional trauma. Contextualised in their post war struggle to regain their faith in American society their civic deprivation and liberation through labour were twisted instruments of democratic power.

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**Endnotes**


10. The La Follette Civil Liberties Committee (1936-41).


22. Marc Treib and Dorothee Imbert, *Garrett Eckbo: Modern Landscapes for Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 123. Vernon DeMars became acting district architect after the death of Burton Cairns; Herbert Hallsteen was district engineer and Nicholas Cirino, regional engineer.

23. Based on plans and photographs located in College of Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley, Vernon DeMars, FF33, and Box 27, Folder VI, 13.
24 Treib and Imbert, Garrett Eckbo, 43. The group adopted the name Telesis after Sociologist Lester Frank Ward’s philosophy of directed social advancement.

25 Treib and Imbert, Garrett Eckbo, 44-6, 47.

26 Treib and Imbert, Garrett Eckbo, 46.


28 Burton et al., Confinement and Ethnicity, 36, Table 3.1.

29 Tulare Detention Facility, Densho Encyclopedia, available at http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Tulare (detention_facility)/. The following description is from accounts on this website.

30 Burton et al., Confinement and Ethnicity, 2, Figure 1.1, which depicts sites in Western U.S. associated with the relocation of Japanese Americans during WWII.


32 Manzanar Relocation Center, California, Records of the War Relocation Authority, 1941-1989, Record Group 210, National Archives, U.S.A.


37 DeMars, A Life in Architecture, 224.


40 Laurence I. Hewes, Final Report of the Participation of the Farm Security Administration in the Evacuation Program of the Wartime Civil Control Administration Civil Affairs Division Western Defense Command and Fourth Army, Farm Security Administration, United States Department of Agriculture, (San Francisco, C.A.: 1942)

41 Personal Justice Denied, 122.

42 Personal Justice Denied, 123.

43 Burton et al., Confinement and Ethnicity, 1. Calculated according to 1999 values of properties.

44 Burton et al., Confinement and Ethnicity, 169.

45 Personal Justice Denied, 180-4.

46 Personal Justice Denied, 203.

47 University of California, Los Angeles, Charles D. Young Library, Fuju Sasaki Papers, 1944-1986, Collection 1440, Box 1, Folders 1-4, weekly reports.

48 Rutgers University Community Repository, Oral histories of Iddy Asada; Robert Hasuke; Anne Lowe; Fusaye Kazaoka, Seabrook Farms Educational and Cultural Center, "I remember Seabrook", available at https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/search/results/?key=root&type%5B5D=%&query=I+remember+Seabrook.


51 Burton et al., Confinement and Ethnicity, 25.

52 This was achieved through the enactment of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, based on the findings of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians.