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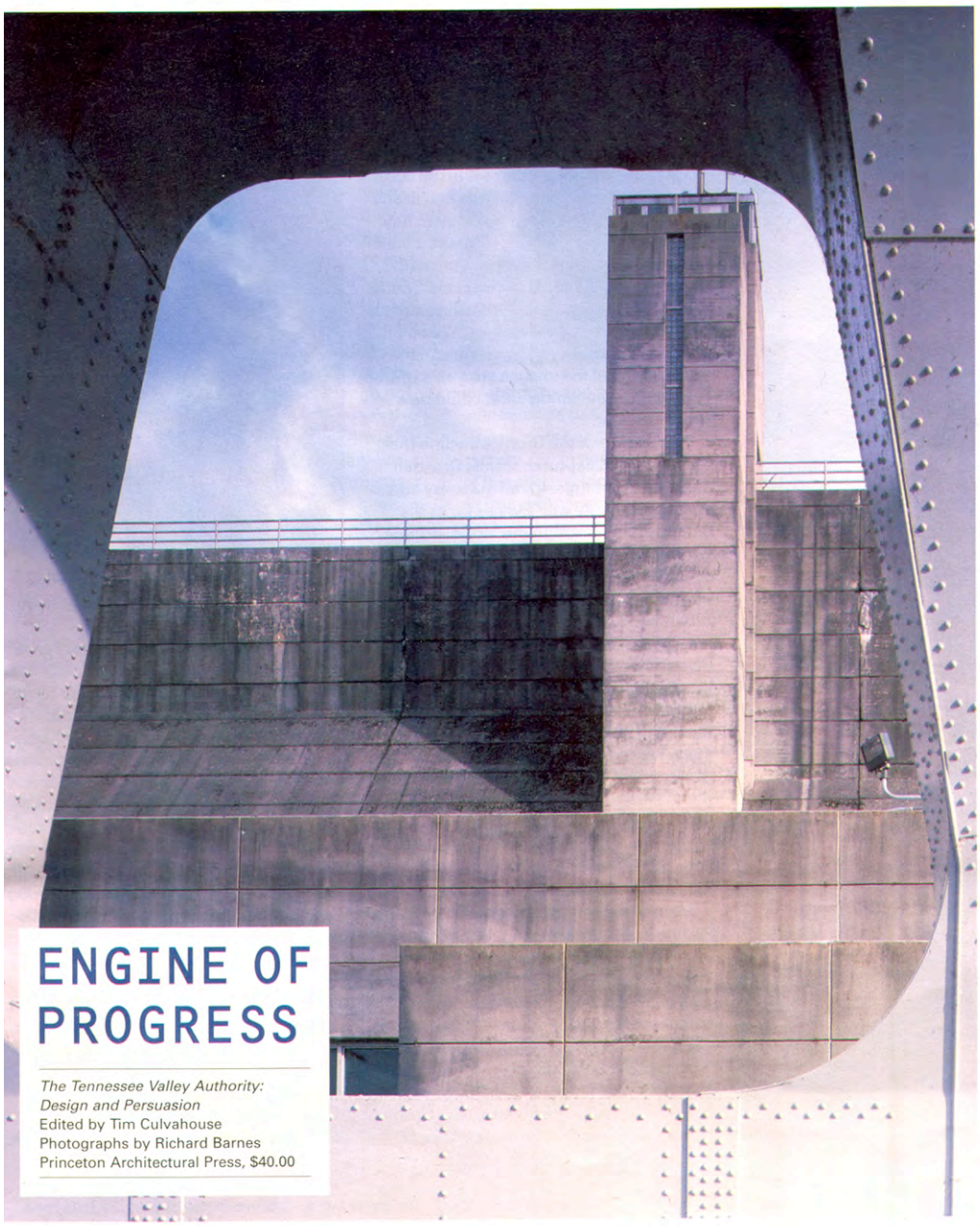
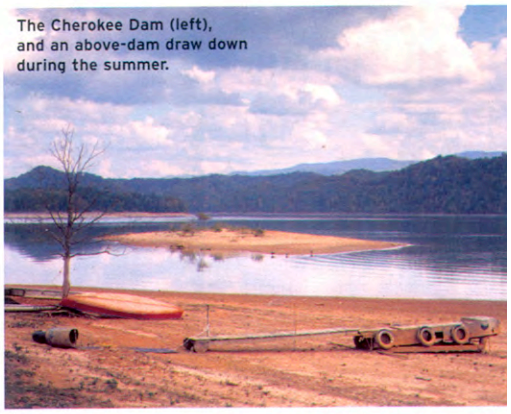


ENGINE OF PROGRESS

The Tennessee Valley Authority: Design and Persuasion
Edited by Tim Culvahouse
Photographs by Richard Barnes
Princeton Architectural Press, $40.00

Considering our current economic crisis and the challenges we face in sustaining our neglected public infrastructure, *The Tennessee Valley Authority: Design and Persuasion*, a set of essays celebrating the history and development of the legendary public works program, is a timely illustration of the power of investment on a grand scale. It arrives just after the 75th anniversary of Congress' passage of the legislation that chartered the TVA at the urging of President Roosevelt in 1933. The TVA was a flagstone of Roosevelt's "engine of progress"—the New Deal—and has outlasted the other ambitious programs of social change put together in his first term.

TVA's purpose was multifold: to improve navigability and flood control on the wild Tennessee River, to reforest and repair the land of the vast Tennessee Valley that had been ravaged by over-farming of cotton and tobacco, and to bring electricity to the impoverished communities of the Southland. This last item was a good example of the authority's use of flexibility and initiative. The hydroelectric dams worked on a regional level: The Tennessee Valley watershed spanned 290,000 acres and included parts of seven states. Today, the TVA is the country's largest producer of electric power, mostly by renewable resources including hydroelectric, solar, and wind, as well as nuclear- and coal-powered energy plants.



The Cherokee Dam (left), and an above-dam draw down during the summer.

Editor Tim Culvahouse and his fellow contributors are at their best when they focus on the singular achievement of the TVA in placing the design of its facilities in the forefront of the modern design movement. As Christine May's chapter on the TVA architects makes clear, "If this project was to usher in a new age, its look had to be modern." Earle Draper, director of the authority's Housing and Planning Division, hired young architects, engineers, and planners and appointed inspiring leaders like Benton MacKaye, Eliel Saarinen as a consultant, and Roland Wank. Wank was trained in the 1920s in a Bauhaus-like institute in Brno in the now-Czech Republic, and arrived in America in 1924. He had been the project architect for the magnificent Union Station in Cincinnati, a modernist transportation icon. It was Wank's persistence in arguing for a redesign of the Norris Dam that led to its transformative image of a compositional whole, unifying the various engineering elements.

The essay on "Redefining Landscape" by Jane Wolff describes TVA's radical ideas about transcending boundaries and local identities. In the space of a dozen years, the agency completely remade the physical and social terrain of a seven-state region roughly the size of Ohio. Its basis for planning and landscape was the geomorphology of the Tennessee Valley watershed—what Benton MacKaye called "bioregionalism." As the 900 miles of the Tennessee River and its tributaries flowed through the varied landscapes within the TVA jurisdiction, it served a population as varied as its terrain. What the people had in common was the Great Depression and, in the poorest part of the United States, not much to hope for. The dams provided abundant electricity and fostered

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ENGINE OF PROGRESS continued from page 29 a new infrastructure of roads and towns. Forests were replanted and new farming techniques were introduced to control erosion. The project was a lasting demonstration that large-scale planning is possible in a democracy, conceived and, as inscribed over every public entry, "Built for the People of the United States of America."

Barry M. Katz and Stephen Heller both explore the ways in which design was put to service in selling the progressive program to a skeptical public. The visitor centers and the dams themselves illustrated that the creative minds of science and government could work with the natural features of the region to produce an integrated work of surpassing beauty and productivity. In his review of the TVA show at MoMA in 1941, Lewis Mumford asserted that in the TVA, America had produced "modern architecture at its mightiest and best." Unfortunately, allied attempts in the late 1930s to create an indigenous craft industry in the model town of Norris was not so successful, because a streamlined aesthetic for domestic products such as teapots and furniture was not popular among rural homemakers.

A selection of recent color photographs by Richard Barnes captures the variety of monumental structures and simple recreational settings throughout the project. His photo essay argues that the dramatic interventions of the TVA into the natural landscape have aged well and coexist comfortably now with clusters of houseboats, hikers, and campgrounds.

One of the book's primary faults is its lack of an index. But each chapter contains numerous endnotes that tie the essays to countless other references and make this a convincing historical survey. An appended chapter offers some helpful guidelines for an itinerary through the current facilities, including the tip that a number of powerhouses and observation decks are no longer open to the public, an apparent response to post-9/11 security concerns. As we look toward an uncertain future, the TVA deserves to be revisited.

WILBUR L. WOODS IS A SENIOR PLANNER AT THE DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING IN NEW YORK.