

## **“Architecture During the Great Depression: A Study of Building Trends in Charlotte, North Carolina”**

On October 28, 1929, Edward Davis of 1909 The Plaza, in Charlotte, North Carolina, received a building permit to construct a 16' x 18' garage. Estimated cost for the project: ninety dollars. The fee for the building permit was one dollar. This appears to have been the last building approved by the City of Charlotte before the onset of the Great Depression. This modest building represents the end of an era of building practices in Charlotte, and the drastic decline in the number of new buildings during the Great Depression illustrates this. But the Depression was much more than an extended pause in American architecture. A close look at the building trends of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County demonstrates that the Great Depression and the New Deal created fundamental changes in the area's architecture.

The buildings of the Great Depression were not just diminished versions of the architecture that had preceded it. A special climate existed during the Great Depression, and this special climate produced certain types of buildings. In Charlotte the economic system that was producing factories, skyscrapers, and modest duplexes during the 1920s appears to have failed during the 1930s. In its place developed a new system that produced an abundance of government buildings, homes for some wealthy people, and a few buildings for the communal use of the county's hard-hit rural residents. The records of Depression-era building in Charlotte and in North Carolina as a whole indicate that it would be a mistake to view the area's diminished architectural output as simply less of the same.

This fundamental change in architecture may not be obvious because in terms of new architectural styles and uses, the Great Depression does not exhibit radical change. For example, people did not give up living in single-family homes and move into communes. New and innovative house and factory designs did not spread across the land. Instead, the Great Depression served as an extended pause in private sector building. New ideas in materials and design were implemented slowly and did not really radically alter the built environment until after World War II. Also, we can see that the trends in housing, such as suburban development, and the architectural styles in place before the Great Depression, generally continued in a reduced or dormant state through the period.

That is not to say that style was not affected at all. Two distinctly divergent categories of architectural style were being embraced in America. Modern and traditional design both found acceptance and proponents during the Depression. While the development of Modernism during the 1930s is well studied, this paper argues that the impact and the significance of the era's traditional architecture were greater.

Today, Charlotte's built environment includes numerous examples that bear witness to these various forces that came into play during the Great Depression. This paper is centered on architecture, but old buildings are no more than historical artifacts, and any radical changes in the architectural record must be reflections of some social changes. Thus, looking at the

underlying social conditions can help us understand architecture, and at the same time, looking at architectural styles and building patterns should tell us much about the larger culture.

### **Histotrophic Views of Depression-Era Architecture**

Architecture does not appear to enter into the main arguments of most historians who deal with the Great Depression. Of course, this is understandable. If you look just at the raw numbers, they tell you that much less was being built during the Great Depression than was being built during the 1920s. In his thorough study of American from 1929 to 1945, David Kennedy barely mentions architecture, lumping the building industry in with other moribund indicators of the economy like auto sales.<sup>[1]</sup> Robert S. McElvaine's discussion of architecture and building in his book, *The Great Depression*, is also narrow. Like Kennedy, McElvaine emphasizes the limitations of building-related measures like the Federal Housing Authority and the Wagner-Stegall Housing Act.<sup>[2]</sup> But it would be hard to discuss the New Deal without talking about the work programs. While literature published at the time highlights the architectural achievements of the public agencies,<sup>[3]</sup> more recent literature fails to go into such detail. In his nearly 1,000-page book, Kennedy tells us only that the Works Progress Administration (WPA) spent \$11 billion, put 8.5 million Americans to work, and built roads, parks, and "many public buildings."<sup>[4]</sup> In his look at North Carolina during the New Deal, Douglas Abrams says that "from 1935 to 1940, North Carolina WPA projects touched the lives of virtually all citizens in the state," and he summarizes this work in just one sentence: "The Public Works Division constructed schools, housing for teachers called teacherages, armories, stadiums, swimming pools, gyms, and community halls."<sup>[5]</sup> McElvaine's discussion of the Public Works Administration (PWA) architecture is equally short. In *Making a New Deal*, Lizabeth Cohen looks at the building-related agencies like the WPA, but she examines only how the work and the relief changed the people. None of these scholarly works goes into any substantive detail about how the buildings themselves, or how the social and governmental changes brought about by the Depression may have changed the forms and styles of the buildings. I argue that a closer look at the buildings, and the building trends from the Great Depression and the New Deal, can be helpful in understanding the larger social and economic issues.

Those writing the social history of the 1930s are more likely to explore the effects of the Great Depression on architecture. William and Nancy Young's *The 1930s* notes the significance of the end of major private construction projects like the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings. They describe a period where the Modernist architecture of the 1920s continued in a diminished fashion with a few important projects such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water, but more often expressed itself in the fantasy of architecture of movies, and in consumer products. At the same time the Youngs argue that Revivalism in architectural style was a powerful force during the Depression, as part of a popular movement toward finding a usable, stable past.<sup>[6]</sup> Still, some social histories pay scant attention to architecture during the Depression. David E. Kyvig's *Daily Life in the United States, 1920 – 1940*, does a wonderful job in describing how electricity and plumbing radically changed the nature of housing design during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but then has nothing substantial to say concerning the Great Depression's effect on architecture.

If some mainstream historians gave little attention to architecture during the Great Depression, some architectural historians gave little attention to the impact of the Great Depression on architecture. In his four hundred page *A Concise History of American Architecture*, Leland M. Roth barely mentions the Depression, and certainly does not concentrate on the government building projects that made up much of all that was built during the Depression. By the time Roth gets to the discussion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he is concentrating solely on the works of nationally prominent architects. With few actual buildings to refer to from the 1930s, Roth describes the academic development of Modernism and the acceptance of the “machine aesthetic” into mass culture.<sup>[7]</sup> Nowhere does he find a place to mention the billions of dollars worth of schools, courthouses, and rustic state park architecture that was constructed during the New Deal. In contrast Cecil D. Elliott’s, *The American Architect from the Colonial Era to the Present*, acknowledges that radical changes took place in architecture during the Depression, and that most architects had to try to adapt to a world where people were not building much. Unlike Roth, Elliott recognized that people in that uncertain time were demanding architecture and design that conveyed security, thus the renewed interest in the Colonial Revival.

Kristina Wilson looking at interior design saw a strong movement toward Colonial Revival, citing Wallace Nutting’s Early American furniture, along with the opening of Colonial Williamsburg in 1935, and the opening of the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She tells us that in dire times, Colonial Revival gave inspiration that America could survive.<sup>[8]</sup>

## **Local Pre-Depression Building Trends**

On the eve of the Great Depression, Charlotte and Mecklenburg County were prosperous and rapidly developing. The area was experiencing unprecedented growth that altered the nature of the place.

Back in 1900, Mecklenburg County was leading the state in cotton production<sup>[9]</sup> and was mostly rural by all measures: 62.3% of all the residents lived outside of the city, and 4,190 farms occupied 93% of the land. But the growth of the City of Charlotte during the following three decades was nothing less than phenomenal, with a nearly 80% increase in the urban population during the 1920s. By 1930, Charlotte had become the largest city in both North and South Carolina, with 82,675 residents living in the city, and 45,296 still living on the farms and in the county’s small towns.<sup>[10]</sup> Of course, growth was concentrated in the city. In the rural parts of the county, building was not robust. Many people continued to live in homes built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some Craftsman bungalow farmhouses were appearing, but the urbanization of the county and a worsening agricultural economy was subduing much new building activity on the farms.<sup>[11]</sup>

In the city, commercial and governmental architecture was generally conservative, taking inspiration from classical forms. Unlike Asheville and Winston-Salem, which feature prominent examples of Art Deco architecture, Charlotte saw limited application of modern styles. Historian Tom Hanchett believes that the conservative nature of the city’s buildings was a reflection of Charlotte’s leadership. Innovators such as D.A. Tompkins and Edward Dilworth Latta had

radically changed the landscape of the city with bold and progressive projects. Hanchett contends that the local dominance of conservative Neo-Classical architecture resulted from the emergence of business leaders in Charlotte who were less willing than their predecessors to take risks. “The generation of New South leaders, including D. A. Tompkins, Edward Dilworth Latta, and George Stephens, who had taken enormous risks to turn the Piedmont into a major industrial region, were passing their power on to a new generation” says Hanchett. “The new leaders seemed much less adventuresome, willing to follow in the directions set by their predecessors. Their homes and offices reflected this increased interest in tradition over innovation, in social correctness rather than risk-taking.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Architectural historians ascribe the business elite’s preference for traditionalist designs to the conservative political, social, and economic values that dominated the era of White Supremacy in North Carolina. “Political power and legal control remained in the hands of the wealthy—whether former landed gentry or the newly rich industrialists—who hired architects and general contractors to create a fabric of building that was consonant with their values.”<sup>[13]</sup> Architects and builders “attempted to meet the needs of the conservative capitalists and urban dwellers who swelled the population and the gross national product in a society that remained conservative politically and socially.”<sup>[14]</sup>

The only major exception to this in Charlotte is the Coca Cola Building. Probably designed in the first month of the Great Depression, and completed in the fall of 1931, the Coca Cola Building may have signaled a new direction in the city’s architectural character. But any such movement was cut short by the Great Depression.

On the eve of the Great Depression, the most conspicuous building activity in Charlotte may have been in the new suburban neighborhoods. Architect Martin Boyer, builders Blythe & Isehour, and contractor E. C. Griffith Company were all busy building Charlotte’s newest and most prestigious neighborhood, Eastover, located across Providence Road from Myers Park, Charlotte’s earlier “most prestigious neighborhood.” Eastover was begun in 1927 with the first houses being built in 1928. Conservative, traditional, and stately, the neighborhood’s large Tudor and Georgian/Colonial Revival houses sat on large lots.<sup>[15]</sup>

Across town, in the city’s center, the year 1929 began with a large building project in the Brooklyn Neighborhood in Charlotte’s Second Ward, one of the four wards that divided the city’s historic center. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Brooklyn was the largest of the city’s African-American neighborhoods. It was a center of life and culture containing numerous churches, schools, professional offices, and homes of the most prosperous and influential in the black community. On January 2, 1929, the Lex Marsh Company had applied to build a two-story office building with a restaurant on the ground floor on land owned by the AME Zion Church, and to be located at the corner of Second Street and Brevard. The architect was listed as J. Cozby Byrd; the project cost \$40,000, and the building fee was \$35.00.

Building permits give us evidence of what was being built. In Charlotte 1319 projects were approved in 1928. In June of that year 120 projects totaling \$702,050 were permitted. (It should be noted that many of the permitted houses were estimated to cost around \$2,000) In addition, \$105,230 in repairs and additions were permitted, for a total of \$807,280 worth of

permitted projects, with an average price of \$6,727. In December of 1928, a total of 67 building permits were issued. The projects were valued at \$470,000 in new construction, and \$38,300 in repairs and additions for a total value of \$508,300, with an average price of \$7,587 per project. In 1929, the number of projects had dropped to 1034.<sup>[16]</sup> It is not clear why there was a 23% drop in permits. Perhaps the first months of what we now call the Great Depression resulted in cancellation of some projects. Or perhaps there was some cooling down from the phenomenal growth of Charlotte during the 1920s. But much more significant change was going to come during the 1930s.

## **Effects of Great Depression on the Building Industry**

### **National**

In America during the early years of the Great Depression, the construction industry collapsed. Housing starts were down more than 90%, going from approximately one million new homes each year in the late 1920s, to only 84,000 new homes in 1933.<sup>[17]</sup> Total spending on construction was reported at \$6.6 Billion in 1928, versus \$1.3 Billion in 1933.<sup>[18]</sup> By 1932, 85% of all architects were out of work.<sup>[19]</sup> Even eminent architects like Frank Lloyd Wright, considered by many to have been the greatest architect of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, faced hard times. Early years of the Great Depression were Wright's "longest fallow period" with only two buildings built from 1928 to 1935.<sup>[20]</sup>

### **Charlotte-Mecklenburg**

Two months into what we now call the Great Depression, on December 30, 1929, Jethro Almond applied to the city to build a \$500 barn on North Tryon Street Extension. It appears to have been a nice barn, with running water, electricity, and a masonry chimney. Because buildings are usually long-term projects that require planning and financing, projects that were "in the works" during the first few months of the Great Depression may not have been affected. But as the Depression settled in, construction in Charlotte declined significantly. By 1932, only 395 projects were permitted: the last that year was a church building on Belmont Ave., with an estimated cost of only \$200, resulting in a \$1.25 fee.

Charlotte issued slightly fewer permits in 1933, just 389. In June of 1933, twenty-eight building permits were issued that amounted to only \$54,950. Even with the inclusion of a \$20,000 brewery on Hutchison Street, the average permitted project was only valued at \$1,964. Compared with the projects from July of 1928 (120 permits valued at \$807,280, with an average of \$6,727 per permit), this was a drop of 93% in the total dollar value of the projects, and a drop of 71% in the value of each individual project. By December 1933, the numbers were quite grim. Only thirteen permits were issued. Their value was \$19,230 in new construction, and just \$1,645 in repairs and additions. While this represented an 81% drop in the number of projects from five years earlier (December 1928, 67 permits totaled \$508,300 for an

average price of \$7,587), the cost of the projects, the amount of money being put into the local building industry, was down a whopping 96%.

The year of 1934 showed even more decline with only 318 permitted projects for a city with a population of over 82,000.

A broad look at the building permits indicates a drastic reduction in the numbers and value of the projects. A more detailed look at a limited sample of the permits also reveals that with the onset of the Great Depression, the nature of the projects changed. For example: the first permitted job in 1929 involved the \$40,000 Brooklyn office building. In contrast, the first permitted job in 1934 involved low paying government work, a \$125 roofing job at the City Courthouse. Looking just at the month of June, 1928, permits included a \$40,000 church building, a \$68,000 apartment building, a \$98,000 apartment building, and a \$65,000 addition to the city's Ford Motor Company Plant. June's permitted projects also included thirty-eight new residences valued under \$5,000. In June of 1933 things were drastically different. It does not appear that any houses valued under \$5,000 were permitted in June of 1933.<sup>[21]</sup> Two homes were permitted, one valued at \$6,500, and the other at \$6,000, located in the upper-class section of Dilworth neighborhood. The month included only one project valued more than \$10,000, and that was the brewery on Hutchison St. Looking just at December, 1928 permits record a \$170,000 commercial building (probably Colonial Arms Apartments) on North Tryon Street, but they also show that more modest commercial architecture was being built, including a \$6,200 bottling facility and a \$6,100 drycleaners. Five years later, in December 1933, just one project, a \$10,000 Georgian Revival house (fig. 1) in the posh Myers Park neighborhood, accounted for nearly half of all the approved construction spending in the city. Before the advent of the Great Depression, Charlotte permits show robust residential and commercial building activities. Permits from 1933 show that what little was being spent was going toward homes for the wealthy, and a brewery.

Cashbooks from local construction firms mirror this trend. The ledger for the Blyth and Isenhour Construction Company in October 1928 began with a cash balance of \$20,931.82 and required four full pages. A later cashbook reveals that in October of 1932 the opening balance was \$472.56, with transactions only taking up one and one-half pages.<sup>[22]</sup>

As the figures from the building permits indicate, houses for the wealthy continued to be built during the Depression. Some of that building was in Eastover. There, Charlotte architect Martin Boyer designed the Colonial Revival John Paul Lucas House in 1931. In 1933 Boyer built his own Georgian/Colonial revival house in the neighborhood at 246 Fenton Place. Charlotte architect M. R. Marsh added to the Eastover landscape with the Tudor style Peter D. Burks House in 1934.<sup>[23]</sup> The Developer of Eastover, E.C. Griffith Company, survived the Great Depression and went on to expand the Eastover neighborhood after World War II.

In contrast to Eastover, the adjoining Pharrsdale neighborhood was in trouble. While Eastover targeted the very wealthy, Pharrsdale targeted the very "well to do." Lots in Pharrsdale lost up to 90% of their value during the Depression. The developer, Lex Marsh Company (the same company that was building the Brooklyn neighborhood office building in 1929) was



foreclosed by the American Bank and Trust Company.<sup>[24]</sup> While everyone struggled, it appears that those who catered to the highest elites in Charlotte had a better chance of survival.

### **Adapting, Coping and Failing**

With 85% of all architects out of work during the Great Depression, Martin Boyer was exceptional. His work files indicate that the Charlotte architect worked on plans for up to forty-eight houses between 1929 and 1941. In addition to the homes Boyer designed for his wealthy clients in Eastover, he also designed the previously mentioned ten-thousand dollar 3,400 square foot brick Georgian Revival home, built at 2208 Sherwood Avenue in Myers Park. The architect designed several new S&W Cafeterias, including: Charlotte (1932), Raleigh (1933), and Washington DC (1934). In 1934, Boyer designed the Harding High School in Charlotte and he supervised the moving of the old Federal Mint, now the Mint Museum, which appears to have been an early grassroots preservation project. Despite his association with Charlotte's elite, one of Boyer's projects was representative of the New Deal's architectural response to the Depression. Along with Charlotte architect J.N. Pease, Boyer designed the city's first public housing project, the WPA-sponsored Piedmont Courts. Funded by part of a \$2,104,000 federal loan, the complex reflected the latest design in multi-family complex layout. Having applied the Colonial Revival style to numerous stately homes, Boyer used it again for this low-income project.<sup>[25]</sup>

Another project was an example of private philanthropy. In 1932 Boyer designed a vacation home for Kenneth S. Tanner in Lake Lure, North Carolina. Tanner was a textile manufacturer. In 1935 Tanner envisioned an alternative type of student housing for his son and other relatives who were attending or would be attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He hired Boyer to design an ideal student house, adjacent to the campus, that would accommodate six students. The house cost Mr. Tanner \$9,500, and it was apparently built with the idea that the property would eventually be conveyed to the school. In addition to Mr. Tanner's son, two deserving student would also live there at no cost, one of whom was young C. Van Woodward, a PhD Student in History.<sup>[26]</sup>

It appears that Martin Boyer stayed very busy during the Great Depression. The fact that he built a new house in Eastover for his own use in 1933, would indicate that he was also doing well financially. His success may have been partly due to his wealthy clientele, who appeared to be able to weather the Depression better than most. Also the homes he designed and the WPA project were executed in traditional styles, that may have been especially welcomed in the uncertain climate of the Great Depression. It also appears that Boyer was able to embrace the new building trends of the time, whether they were working on a Federal Government project for the poor, a city school, or a private philanthropic experiment. His example shows that those who were flexible and connected to the wealthy had a better chance of survival.

But even a relationship with the wealthiest clients could not keep some architects working. Hugh White, lived and worked across the Catawba River in nearby Gastonia. White had a reputation as one of the foremost architects in North Carolina. He designed an impressive number of buildings during the 1920s, including the Gastonia City Hall, Gastonia Memorial

Hall, Gastonia Public Library, and Gastonia High School, the later which cost an astounding \$500,000.<sup>[27]</sup> In addition to public buildings, White designed commercial buildings and homes. These included the 8,400 square foot Stowe family mansion in Belmont North Carolina. Currently there are fourteen White-designed houses in Gastonia alone that are on the Study List for the National of Register of Historic Places. But even with his credentials, White struggled through the Depression. “To put food on the table”<sup>[28]</sup> he sold maps of the county out of his car to farmers and mill owners.

As illustrated by the fate of Hugh White, times were generally bad for architects. Nationally, big firms laid-off many architects. Trade magazine articles however reflect more boosterism than would have been found normally. In the April 1936 issue of the *Architectural Forum*, optimistic articles about the future of the building market were surrounded by abysmal graphs and charts. Some of these trained professionals left the field, while others, who felt they had nothing to loose, started their own small firms.<sup>[29]</sup> With very little work available, some spent their time developing ideas in the latest style, Modernism. Others, like Martin Boyer, found ways to adapt to the new climate. This often meant finding work on Government projects, or becoming involved in re-modeling or addition projects that would have seemed too small to work on a few years earlier. These small jobs may have helped secure an acceptance for Modernism. Pushed by product manufactures such as US Steel,<sup>[30]</sup> new metal storefronts were seen as an easy and inexpensive way to improve the nation’s main streets. Still others found that there was a market for traditional designs in an expanding market for mass produced house plans.

Like the plan books that became popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, magazines such as Ladies Home Journal and Good House Keeping regularly published house plans during the Great Depression. Despite the drastic downturn in the actual number of houses being built, the number of published plans actually increased greatly during the Great Depression. Perhaps the magazines turned into “wish books” for those with little hope of actually building their own homes. Between 1931 and 1938, the Ladies Home Journal produced around 1,100 house plans for publication in the magazine, and to sell for one dollar through the mail.<sup>[31]</sup> These plans in widely distributed magazines, like movies, were cheap and probably offered a degree of escape from the misery of the Great Depression. Thus, the house plans were a product in themselves. Very few homes were being built, and yet these published house plans were extremely popular. The plans may have represented a hoped-for future. What is significant about these images is that they were consumed. Consumer demand drove the production of the plans. Most of these designs were traditional in character, contrasting with the modernistic academic ideas percolating during the architectural “down time” of the Great Depression, and the modernistic architecture that was published in these same magazines during the 1920s.

People may have craved traditional designs because they had been jolted away from a belief in progress and modernization by the Great Depression. Popular culture, which had embraced all things modern in the 1920s, turned toward the past in the 1930s, specifically America’s past. The opening of Colonial Williamsburg in 1935 marked a huge shift in both American architecture and interior design. Design historian Kristina Wilson writes that the



appeal of the Colonial Revival was simply that it gave hope that America could survive.<sup>[32]</sup> It is likely many people rejected modernism because it appeared to have failed.

Combining these somewhat divergent views of the architecture of the 1930s, it is safe to say that two movements existed together in America. One was the academic pursuit of Modernistic design. The other was a renewed interest in tradition design. Two contemporary books very well illustrate these two movements. The first is *Built in USA*. This curiously named book was published by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and highlights forty-seven buildings that show the development of Modern architecture in the United States from the time of the International Exhibition of Modern Architecture in 1932 until the publication of the book in 1944. In stark contrast to the general views of the 1930s, the author Elizabeth Mock saw a wealth of “good building”<sup>[33]</sup> during the years of the Great Depression and the early years of World War Two. This is a rather confusing statement, unless it is considered that the creators of the book only needed enough example for a museum exhibit. *Built in USA* discusses topics like the “Affirmation of Materials,” “Volume and Plan” and “Wright vs. Le Corbusier.” Mock’s thesis on Modernism even discusses the influence of vernacular architecture on Modernism.

“Americans looked again at the stone and wood barns of Pennsylvania, the white clapboard walls of New England, the low, rambling ranch house of the West, and found them good. They were not interested in the picturesque details of these buildings, but in their straightforward use of material and their subtle adaptation to climate and topography.”<sup>[34]</sup>

The book features the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, Phillip Johnson, Albert Kahn, Louis Kahn, Pietro Belluschi, and many others. None of the featured buildings were constructed in Charlotte, or anywhere in North Carolina.

A book that illustrates the interest in tradition design during the 1930s is *North Carolina WPA: Its Story*. The book is a celebration of the accomplishments of the WPA. Along with the roads, bridges, and airports, the pages prominently display the buildings of the WPA. Well over one hundred of the program’s 601 new and 2242 renovated buildings are presented. None of the buildings feature Modern design or architectural details. The majority could be called restrained Classical/Colonial Revival (fig.2), featuring symmetrical brickwork and perhaps a portico or arched window openings. Others are more full-blown examples of the Neo-Classical. Perhaps the most notable architecture in *North Carolina WPA: Its Story*, can be found in the numerous picturesque rustic WPA buildings. These rustic buildings include massive rubble stone gymnasiums like the one at the Newland School in Avery County, rock teachers’ houses at Appalachian State Teachers College, or the simple frame Sylva Community building. These buildings may have been built in the rustic style because local building materials were available. But regardless, the styles of the buildings featured in *North Carolina WPA: Its Story* are in stark contrast to those found in *Built in USA*. Looking at the significant numbers of buildings, as well as their diverse locations, leads me to conclude that the people and the market were building, and maybe demanding, traditional designs. Like the traditional designs of Martin Boyer, the WPA designs did not express the latest academic architectural ideas, but instead were

imbued with a message of continuity, permanence, and a hope for the future rooted in the strength of the past. The picturesque details of the massive rock gymnasiums were exactly what was being rejected by Mock. It appears that there were two strains of architecture flowing through the years of the Great Depression. Modernism was being promoted by academics and some elite professionals, while the public agencies were putting the people to work constructing buildings that instilled hope and improved their communities.

Perhaps because they are more photogenic than roads or canal projects, buildings and structures dominate *North Carolina WPA: Its Story* in a way that is foreign to the typical accounts of the WPA. The image of the WPA we could take from reading Cohen, Kennedy or McElvaine might be of a worker, or of a New Deal policy maker. The worker is definitely highlighted in *North Carolina WPA: Its Story*, but more prominent are the buildings. When compared with *Built in USA, North Carolina WPA: Its Story* perhaps better demonstrates the impact that the 1930s had on architecture.

## **Architectural Response to the Great Depression**

In the case of Martin Boyer, we see that he was apparently successful continuing the architectural practices of the 1920s. In the public work as expressed in *North Carolina WPA: Its Story*, we can see that the idea of a stable past may have influenced the selection of evocative traditional architecture of the projects. But in this next section I propose to show that in some cases the Great Depression actually changed architecture.

### **Government Response**

Franklin D. Roosevelt in particular prescribed action, for its own stimulating effect. The most tangible results of this call for action are the thousands of buildings built by public agencies during the New Deal. As illustrated in *North Carolina WPA: Its Story*, the government took an unprecedented role in building during the New Deal. In 1927 the total construction spending in the nation was over \$12 billion. Roughly 20% of that was government spending. By 1936 the total construction spending in the US was only around \$6.5 billion, and of that, 60% was government funded.

Far from business as usual, this phenomenal government involvement shaped the building industry and greatly influenced the types and styles of the buildings being built. Buildings built by public agencies during the Great Depression appear to have been imbued with a high degree of symbolism. Driven by the academic architectural community, Modern architecture was utilized for some government projects. If there was symbolism associated with Modern architecture, it was that technology and modern efficiency could cure the world of its woes. Art Deco appears to have been preferred for airport buildings including the Bowman Field in Louisville, Kentucky,<sup>[35]</sup> and the now demolished administration/terminal building at Douglas Municipal Airport in Charlotte. The stark Modern architecture of the International style appears to have been reserved for the least accessible public buildings. One example is the TVA Powerhouse (fig.4) in Norris Tennessee.<sup>[36]</sup>

Meanwhile, the same forces of uncertainty, and a longing for images of a stable past that encouraged “wish-book” traditional home designs in the popular press, encouraged the designers of many public projects to also look to the past.

The New Deal represented a “search for a usable American Past, for a tradition that could provide guidance and justification for present programs and projects.”<sup>[37]</sup> For these reasons, much New Deal architecture, especially courthouses and post offices, utilized Georgian/Colonial Revival style. But, as illustrated in *North Carolina WPA: Its Story*, one of the most notable aspect of the New Deal architecture was the prominence of the Rustic style. Using as an example the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century architecture of the National Park Service, the New Deal planners and builders embraced Rustic architecture like never before. This type of architecture accomplished the same affirmation as the Colonial Revival, but was much simpler to apply to small buildings such as bathhouses in parks, and community centers in small towns. The Rustic style was adaptable to the WPA policies. The WPA often required that buildings be produced with locally available materials, which lessened the cost and encouraged more local involvement.<sup>[38]</sup> An example of this happened on the Campus of North Carolina’s Women’s College, now UNC Greensboro. There in 1935 the WPA created a Recreational Facility,<sup>[39]</sup> a house-sized log building adjacent to the athletic fields. The building featured a front porch supported with log posts, and rustic-style bent-limb trusses. No record of any such small-scale publicly funded building exists in Mecklenburg County.

However, not all rustic projects were small. Large stone WPA schools dot the North Carolina mountains,<sup>[40]</sup> log stone and timber lodges, such as the massive Timberline Lodge in Oregon<sup>[41]</sup> are found in the Pacific Northwest, and faux-adobe museums and visitor centers were built in the Southwest.<sup>[42]</sup>

### **Government Response Charlotte-Mecklenburg**

In Charlotte, it appears that the Government response, in terms of architecture, to the Great Depression was slow, which was typical for North Carolina. Out of \$6.1 billion spent nationwide by the PWA, only \$86 million went to North Carolina.<sup>[43]</sup> The state ranked last in terms of WPA spending, and 43<sup>rd</sup> in Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) spending.<sup>[44]</sup> Still, on the bleak landscape of the Depression, the federal money did make a significant impact on the built environment. Major projects were undertaken on the Blue Ridge Parkway, at Fort Bragg, and the along the Cape Fear River. WPA projects included airports (fig 3), sewage treatment plants, and the amphitheater of the outdoor drama, *The Lost Colony*.

American Legion Memorial Stadium (fig. 6) is perhaps the most representative of all the New Deal Buildings in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The FERA, Civil Works Administration (CWA), and WPA contributed over \$120,000 to the project. Fittingly its completion was rushed to accommodate a visit by FDR on September 10, 1936. The Observer reported that such a project would never have been accomplished if it had not been for the investment of Federal money.<sup>[45]</sup>

Another large WPA project was the Palmer Fire School (fig. 5), begun in 1938, and dedicated in 1940. At a cost around \$50,000, the building represented the cooperative philosophy of the New

Deal. Money was provided for the project, but materials, in this case stone, was supplied locally. Plans for the building were drawn by the City Engineering Department, while firemen hauled stone, produced the interior woodwork, and landscape the grounds. This cooperative philosophy was conducive to the rustic style.<sup>[46]</sup>

Public building projects were not limited to the city. In 1938, WPA-sponsored Agricultural Buildings were constructed in the Mecklenburg County town of Huntersville and the rural community of Long Creek<sup>[47]</sup>

### **Response in Rural Mecklenburg County**

It has already been noted that some wealthy individuals in Charlotte were able to continue to build during the Great Depression. In the rural sections of the county, another type of notable, non-governmental building was taking place.

During the 1930s, some farmers and small town residents in rural Mecklenburg County constructed four log buildings for use by their communities. Three are clustered in northern Mecklenburg County with the Mt. Zion Methodist Church Hut (1932) (fig. 8) in the Town of Cornelius, the John Howard Men's Cabin (1931) (fig. 7) in Davidson, and the Ramah Presbyterian Church Hut (1935) (fig. 9) in the countryside near Huntersville. The fourth, the Providence Women's Club, Community House (1939) (fig. 10), is located in the southernmost part of the county, in what was a rural unincorporated community. These buildings were not directly part of any government program. The planning, construction, and limited cost of the projects were all the responsibility of the rural residents.

All of the building accounts imply that the impetus for the construction was homegrown. Far from being organized from above, the Ramah Hut account, which is typical, hints at an un-organized, grassroots approach.

The log cabin was completed by the men of Ramah in 1935 for the primary purpose of providing a meeting place for the Men's Bible Class. Again, without a specific organizational structure, the male members saw the need and satisfied it by contributing the materials and providing their own labor to produce the building.<sup>[48]</sup>

The account of the building of the Mt. Zion Hut is similar:

In September the Men's Bible Class... started work on their Sunday School building. This building is nearing completion and is a credit to the church and community. The building is made of log, is well built and attractive. A large rock chimney and fireplace adds greatly to the usefulness and attractiveness of the building. The auditorium (large main room of the building) is 30 x 50 and the kitchen is 10 x 16. The building is uniquely lighted with lanterns in which electric bulbs are used. This building will serve not only as the home of the large Mount Zion

Men's Bible Class, but as a recreation and social center of the Church. It fills a long felt need in the Church."<sup>[49]</sup>

All of the accounts emphasize two things: that the buildings were built communally at little cost, and that they filled a need. Three of the buildings, the Ramah Hut, the Mt. Zion Hut, and the John Howard Men's Cabin, were constructed to house men's bible classes, but minutes from church meetings indicate that they served for multiple functions.<sup>[50]</sup>

The choice of log buildings may have been influenced by the same factors that influenced the WPA's choice of a rustic style for many of their buildings. These rural residents may have wanted to connect with a comforting, less complicated past.

Mecklenburg County's long tradition of log construction may have been a factor in the style of these four communally built buildings. Many of the county's rural residents had frequent, if not intimate contact with log buildings in the form of barns and other outbuildings.<sup>[51]</sup> In the 1920s and 30s, the county's traditional log buildings could have served as daily reminders to the rural communities of their log-building heritage. But a close look at the subject buildings reveals that their designs have very little in common with the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century log-building traditions that dominated western North Carolina.<sup>[52]</sup> Instead of being representations of Mecklenburg County folk culture, the designs of the log buildings were more influenced by popular images of log cabins featured in pattern books, by popular images in the mass media and consumer products such as Log Cabin syrup cans and Lincoln Logs. But none of this diminishes the argument that these rural residents were looking to architecture to present a stability that was seemingly lost to them, or that these buildings represented a direct response to the Great Depression.

## **A Return to Normal**

In the later years of the Great Depression, building activity appears to have picked up. The completion of the Art Deco Woolworth Store at 112 N. Tryon in 1939 may have marked an end to a long period of Uptown building inactivity. This was followed by the 1941 MGM Film Exchange at 303 S. Church St., built in the Art Moderne style.<sup>[53]</sup> In 1942 a new Federal Reserve Bank blended Art Moderne and Neoclassical Styles. Perhaps with the end of the worst of the economic conditions, and the return of private money into the building industry, traditional design began to lose some of its authority. Instead, the old movement toward Modernism was revived as the nation looked forward to a supposed brighter future.

## **Conclusion**

Because relatively little has been written about the architecture of the Great Depression, it is easy to look at the grim building statistic from the period and conclude that little happened. But seeing the architecture of the 1930s as simply a diminished version of the architectural trends that came before it is simply wrong. With the Great Depression, the nature of what was built

was fundamentally altered. A close look at the building records in Charlotte and at the existing or documented Depression-era buildings in the city and in Mecklenburg County shows that while overall building declined drastically, a larger share of the diminished pie involved homes for the wealthy. Historic building inventories, and the records of architect Martin Boyer support this. The built environment as well as the publications of public agencies during the period demonstrate that government projects had a great effect on American architecture during the Depression. The government became involved in building projects on a scale never before seen, even in North Carolina, where Federal spending was somewhat limited. The building of factories, commercial buildings, and much of the housing ended. In its place came some homes for the wealthy, an unprecedented program of public building, and some rare examples of grassroots community buildings.

Despite its limited application, some scholars see the development of Modernism as the only important architectural achievement of the 1930s. But an examination of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County's built environment, as well as the works of WPA and the ERA in North Carolina, fails to support this. Quite to the contrary, the resources for this paper indicate that traditional architecture was embraced during the Depression. Whether it was a Colonial Revival courthouse in Eastern North Carolina, the Georgian Revival Bullard House in Myers Park, the rustic rock Palmer Fire School in Charlotte, or the log men's Sunday School hut at Mt. Zion Methodist Church in rural Mecklenburg County, most of the building from the 1930s that I could identify, looked to the past. Whether this is part of some larger social trend that might include political movements, or popular culture is beyond the realm of this research. But hopefully this research could be used to understand broader patterns of history.

It is important to see Depression-era architecture as a product of its time. In doing so, we can better understand its style, how it was built, and the reason it was built. Once these issues are explored, Depression-era architecture can then be useful in understanding the places where these buildings were constructed.

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<sup>[1]</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 69

<sup>[2]</sup> Robert McElvaine *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993), p. 303.

<sup>[3]</sup> *North Carolina WPA: Its Story*(Raleigh: Federal Works Agency, Information Service, 1940), highlights the building of city halls, courthouses, schools, armories, armories, hospitals, recreation centers, and sanatoriums.

<sup>[4]</sup> Kennedy, p. 253.

<sup>[5]</sup> Douglas Carl Abrams, *Conservative Constraints: North Carolina and the New Deal* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), p. 142.



- <sup>[6]</sup> William and Nancy Young, *The 1930s* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 65-79.
- <sup>[7]</sup> Leland M. Roth, *A Concise History of American Architecture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 273.
- <sup>[8]</sup> Kristina Wilson, *Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 9.
- <sup>[9]</sup> North Carolina Board of Agriculture, *North Carolina and Its Resources*, (Winston MI and J.C. Stewart, Public Printers and Binders, 1896), p. 158.
- <sup>[10]</sup> Population in 1930 was 82,675 according to Richard Mattson, "National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form: Historic and Architectural Resources of Rural Mecklenburg County, North Carolina" (Washington: National Park Service, 1990), Sec E p. 16
- <sup>[11]</sup> Emily D. Ramsey "Survey and Research Report for the Jesse and Mary K. Washam House" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 2001).
- <sup>[12]</sup> Thomas W. Hanchett, "Charlotte Architecture: Design Through Time Part 2." (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission). Available at <http://landmarkscommission.org/educationarchitecturept.2.htm>.
- <sup>[13]</sup> Catherine Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p.294.
- <sup>[14]</sup> Catherine Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) p.290
- <sup>[15]</sup> Thomas W. Hanchett, "The Eastover Neighborhood: Charlotte's Elite Automobile Suburb" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission). In the files of the CMHLC, also found at <http://www.cmhpf.org/neighborhoods/Eastover.html>
- <sup>[16]</sup> These calculations were derived from Charlotte Building Permits, on file in the Carolina Room in the main branch of the Public library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The collection includes permits that are roughly organized by the year from 1911 until 1935.
- <sup>[17]</sup> Cecil D. Elliott, *The American Architect from the Colonial Era to the Present* (Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland & Co., 2003), p. 65.
- <sup>[18]</sup> Graph in Architectural Forum, April 1936, p. 361
- <sup>[19]</sup> Young, p. 59
- <sup>[20]</sup> Franklin Toker, *Falling Water Rising* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), p. 161.

<sup>[21]</sup> Some permits are incomplete in terms of building types, but by looking at addresses, builder, and cost of project, a reasonable estimate can be made as to what was being built. Generally, buildings that were not identified by use were residences.

<sup>[22]</sup> Blythe and Isenhour ledgers and workbooks are kept in the Special Collections of the Atkins Library at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte.

<sup>[23]</sup> Hanchett, "Eastover."

<sup>[24]</sup> Hanchett, "Eastover."

<sup>[25]</sup> The papers of Martin Boyer are on file in the Special Collections of the Atkins Library at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. Plans are numbered and some are dated. His notes indicate that the Piedmont Courts was a WPA project, however Tom Hanchett in his essay "The Belmont Villa Heights-Optimist Park Survey Area" indicates funding came from the United States Housing Administration.

<sup>[26]</sup> "It's Incredible - Perfect House Built for Five University Boys: Kenneth Tanner, Jr. and Four Others Occupy Collegiate Paradise at Hill." *News & Observer*, Sunday, October 20, 1935. As reprinted by the West House Coalition on their website <http://elliekinnaid.org/westhouse/nando.html>

<sup>[27]</sup> Bishir, p. 395. A list of Hugh White properties on the National Register Study List is kept by the NC State Historic Preservation Office in Raleigh.

<sup>[28]</sup> H. Edward White, "From Architect to Map Salesman," in *The Great Depression - How We Coped Worked and Played: Life-Experience Stories From the Carolinas' Piedmont*, ed. Margaret G. Bigger, (Charlotte: ABA, 2001)1`, p.172.

<sup>[29]</sup> Elliot, p. 155.

<sup>[30]</sup> Gabrielle Esperdy, "The Odd-Job Alleyway of Building: Modernization, Marketing, and Architectural Practice in the 1930's" *Journal of Architectural Education*, 4 (2005), pp. 24-40.

<sup>[31]</sup> Based on untitled article in *Ladies Home Journal*, April 1935, page 140, and on plan numbers from June 1938 issue.

<sup>[32]</sup> Wilson, p. 9.

<sup>[33]</sup> Elizabeth Mock, *Built in USA: 1932-1944* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1944), p. 7.

<sup>[34]</sup> Mock, p. 14.

<sup>[35]</sup> Bowman Field Historic District is listed with the National Register of Historic Places. An essay of its significance is available from the Park Service at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/aviation/bow.htm>

<sup>[36]</sup> Mock, p. 111.

<sup>[37]</sup> Alfred Jone, "The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era," *American Quarterly* (1971) p. 740.

<sup>[38]</sup> J.S. Kirk, Walter A. Cutter, and Thomas W. Morse eds., *Emergency Relief in North Carolina. A Record of the Development and the Activities of the North Carolina Emergency Relief Administration, 1932-1935* (North Carolina Emergency Relief Commission, 1936), p. 84.

<sup>[39]</sup> Allen W. Trelease, *Making North Carolina Literate: the University of North Carolina at Greensboro from Normal School to Metropolitan University* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2004).

<sup>[40]</sup> *North Carolina WPA: Its Story*, (Raleigh: North Carolina Works Projects Administration, 1940), p. 12.

<sup>[41]</sup> "Timberline Lodge: An Expression of Hope and Purpose," (Forest Service, USDA, 1984).

<sup>[42]</sup> Laura Soullière Harrison, Randall Copeland, and Roger Buck "Historic Structure Report, 1988 : CCC Buildings, Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico," (U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, Denver Service Center, 1991)

<sup>[43]</sup> Abrams, p. 53.

<sup>[44]</sup> Abrams, p. 113.

<sup>[45]</sup> Dan L. Morrill, "Survey and Research Report on American Legion Memorial Stadium" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 2003) kept in the file of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, Charlotte, North Carolina.

<sup>[46]</sup> Dan L. Morrill, "Survey and Research Report on the Palmer Fire School" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1989) kept in the file of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, Charlotte, North Carolina.

<sup>[47]</sup> Dan L. Morrill, "Survey and Research Report on Education Buildings at Long Creek Elementary School and Huntersville Elementary School" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1991) kept in the file of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, Charlotte, North Carolina.

<sup>[48]</sup> Nell Bradford Jenkins, *They Would Call it Ramah Grove: a History of Ramah Presbyterian Church*, (Huntersville, NC: Ramah Presbyterian Church, 1999), p. 100.

<sup>[49]</sup> “Session Minutes of the Mount Zion United Methodist Church,” October 18, 1932, in Miriam Smith Whisnant, “The History of Mount Zion United Methodist Church.”

<sup>[50]</sup> Session Minutes of the Mount Zion United Methodist Church, October 18, 1932, and minutes from the Women’s Auxiliary at Ramah Church, reprinted in Neil Jenkins *They Would Call it Ramah*

<sup>[51]</sup> This is based on a survey of existing and demolished log buildings around the Ramah Hut in Huntersville. A map of the results is on file at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission

<sup>[52]</sup> See Stewart Gray, “Building Construction in Mecklenburg County From 1920 to 1945” (Charlotte - Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 2005). No file in the office of the C-MHLC, and available at <http://www.cmhpf.org/SurveyLogHouses.htm>

<sup>[53]</sup> An inventory of Historic Properties is kept by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission. These properties were identified in the “neighborhood Guide” found on the internet at <http://www.cmhpf.org/neighborhoods/guide.html>