Jane C. Loeffler

TVA's Public Planning

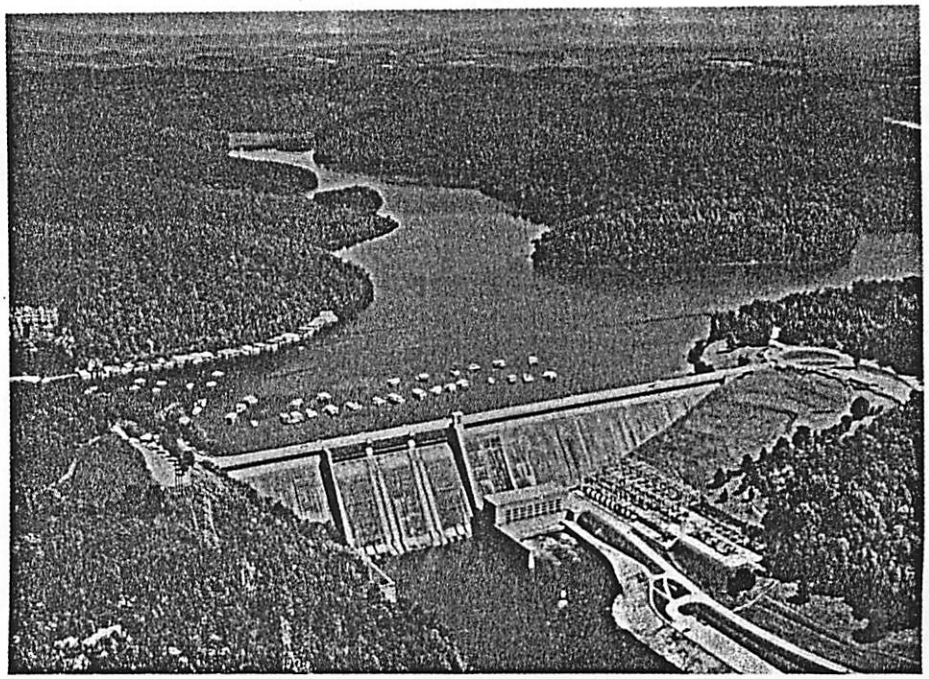
WALTER L. CREESE

When the artist Christo hung a huge curtain across a Colorado mountain valley in 1970, he drew attention to the relationship between art and landscape. He might have saved himself the cost and bother of that ephemeral project by visiting the Tennessee Valley, where architects, planners, and public policymakers joined in a much more significant and lasting effort to unite art, nature, and public purpose in the 1930s. Out of that effort, known as the Tennessee Valley Authority, came a series of twenty-one dams that spanned the Tennessee River from Knoxville to Paducah, providing hydroelectric power and an infusion of good intentions aimed at the overall improvement of the worn-out land and its equally worn-out tenants—poor mountain people for whom the promise of American life had lost its meaning.

President Franklin Roosevelt established TVA during his first 100 days in office in 1933. It was a dramatic and tangible manifestation of his intention to stimulate economic recovery through conservation, scientific resource management, and regional planning. In the 1920s it became possible for the first time to transmit electricity over long distances, thus making it possible to imagine self-contained industrial communities of low density dispersed across the open landscape in place of ever-growing central cities surrounded by sprawl.

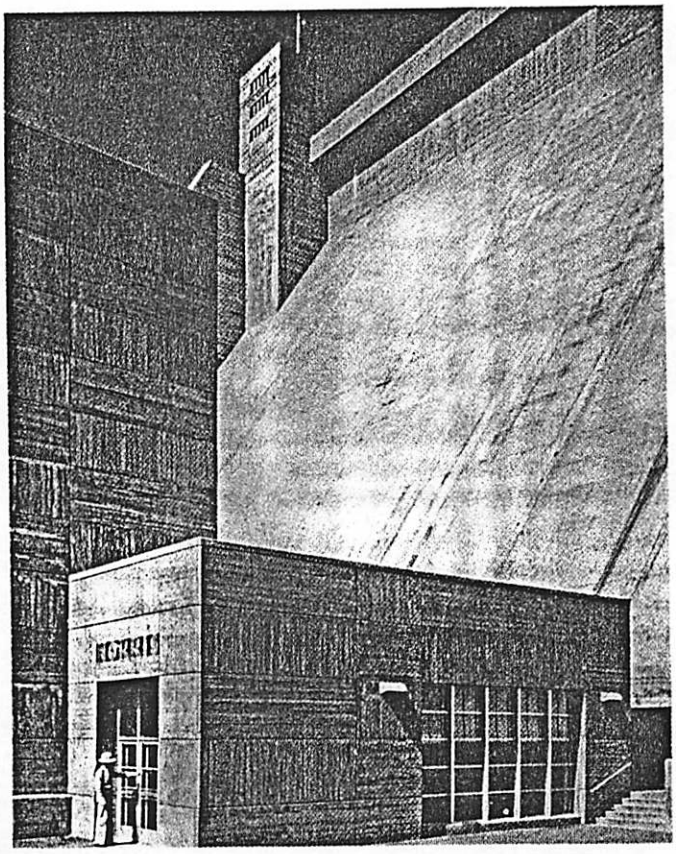
But TVA was much more than a scheme to produce and distribute electricity, as Walter L. Creese points out so eloquently in *TVA's Public Planning: The Vision, the Reality*. It was rather an honest attempt to apply design and technology to the task of conserving nature and building community. As Creese notes, however, it was also an attempt that became tangled in a web of politics—personal, local, national, and global, one that came to reflect the American ambivalence toward public planning, and ultimately, as a result of changing priorities and wartime needs, one that failed to achieve its ambitious goals.

Writers such as Geoffrey and Susan Jellicoe list TVA among the greatest of the world's man-made landscapes in *The*



Bird's eye view, Norris Dam, Tennessee Valley Authority; Bureau of Reclamation and Roland Wank, 1934–36. (From *TVA's Public Planning*.)

Landscape of Man (1975), a survey that starts with Stonehenge and includes Moorish fortifications at the Alhambra, massive Peruvian stone structures at Machu Picchu, and the Roman aqueduct at Nîmes. But even the Jellicoes, sensitive as they are to the human dimension of landscape, define TVA objectives largely in terms of its potential to provide power, flood control, and recreation facilities. At its inception, as Creese ably argues, TVA had a specific mandate to go far beyond such considerations, to combine industry and agriculture in a way that would create a new sort of economic and social structure capable of sustaining regional integrity and promoting regional growth.



Elevator tower and entrance to the power house, Norris Dam, Tennessee Valley Authority; Bureau of Reclamation and Roland Wank, 1934–36. (From *TVA's Public Planning*.)

TVA was not a totally new idea when Roosevelt created it and appointed its first three-member management team: Arthur Morgan, the engineer and idealist; Harcourt Morgan, appointed for his expertise in Southern agriculture (no relation to Arthur); and David Lilienthal, protégé of Felix Frankfurter, advocate of Taylorism and Scientific Management, and former public-utility manager whose goal was cheap power, above all.

A variety of small-scale utopian schemes preceded TVA in the region, Creese notes, including the socialist community of Ruskin founded in 1894. His analysis ties TVA to Gifford Pinchot's earlier experiments in scientific forestry at Biltmore (George Vanderbilt's vast estate in Asheville, North Carolina); Arthur Morgan's earlier development of the Miami (Ohio) Conservancy District, the first coordinated flood-control program in the United States; Benton MacKaye's proposals for urban decentralization; and Henry Ford's attempt to create a model community merging city and country in the area of the Muscle Shoals Dam.

Even with these precedents, it took the initiative and far-thinking awareness of several additional figures to shape TVA into a public-policy package. Senator George Norris, who stopped Ford from buying Muscle Shoals because he adamantly opposed private ownership of electric power, is the man most closely associated with the TVA legislation. His interest in power had to do with his interest in fertilizer production—one of TVA's prime objectives. But Norris was not the idea man. According to Creese, Frederick Gutheim, a young Washington planner, authored the crucial sections of the law pertaining to social betterment with John Nolen, Jr. Gutheim and Nolen, aided by Charles W. Eliot II, convinced Norris to consider the valley as a total region rather than as a series of unrelated episodes and saw in the TVA the opportunity to improve the quality of life through planning. They were backed in their efforts by Frederic Delano, the President's uncle, who had Roosevelt's ear in this matter.

Viennese-born architect Roland Wank was appointed chief of the design team. His optimistic statement of clarity and control at Norris Dam (1934–36) grows out of City Beautiful thinking, French Art Deco, and Viennese Moderne, but not, as Creese points out, from the International Style, so much in vogue at the time. It was not transparency nor weightlessness that designers sought to achieve at the TVA, but rather solidity and security. Still, they managed to animate their work with color and texture, giving even the turbine rooms a brightness and openness that contrasts sharply with later facilities built at Oak Ridge by the Atomic Energy Commission.

The original TVA vision faded as wartime needs imposed themselves upon the region. The tiny greenbelt town of Norris Village, symbolizing so much of the hope for rural prosperity, was never adequately funded and was eventually sold to private investors in 1948. Likewise, Fontana Village, the first prefabricated community in the United States, possibly in the world, passed into oblivion as the overall focus shifted from uplifting the life of the valley to atomic weapons research, and national-defense policy forced TVA to open steam plants fired by strip-mined coal.

Creese's work is remarkable for the way in which he sets TVA into the broad context of American cultural history, enriching his narrative with examples from art, photography, literature, and film history. It is noteworthy also for the author's nonpartisan, but by no means indifferent, approach to his material—especially apparent, for example, in his remarks on the Tellico Dam and its associated new town, Timberlake (1967–75). The book is beautifully produced and illustrated with fine

photographs, but the publisher should have tried harder to reproduce a readable map of the region.

It has always seemed curious that graduate schools have offered degree programs that differentiated between city planning and regional planning, when such a distinction makes so little sense. Furthermore, the preoccupation with "urban" design tends to set up a regrettable dichotomy between urban and rural. This sort of book underscores the fact that fruitful innovation occurs best when designers, politicians, and historians part with such preconceptions.

What makes the book illuminating is the way in which Creese examines his complex subject from varied perspectives. Readers familiar with his *Crowning of the American Landscape* (1985) know that Creese is an architectural historian for whom architecture involves much more than building style and planning is more than statistical analysis. For him, both are projections of policies and values and both are interrelated. Here he has the opportunity to study one regional landscape in depth. The result is a broad and thoughtful assessment of physical design and social planning as tools for improvement. It is most welcome in this field for its fine writing and unusual for its balance. It will be of special interest to those who ponder the preciousness of regionalism, the impact of technology on people and land, and the expressive meaning of civic art.

TVA'S PUBLIC PLANNING: THE VISION, THE REALITY, Walter L. Creese, University of Tennessee Press, 1990, 388 pp., illus., $38.95.