

ARTS & LETTERS

Grand Dams

THE SOURCE: "Power for the People" by Tom Vanderbilt, in *The Oxford American*, Fall 2005.

THE ASPIRATIONS OF THE Tennessee Valley Authority, created by an act of Congress in 1933, were as enormous as the dams it built.

Constructed to make the Tennessee River more navigable and less flood prone, as well as to reclaim the "marginal lands" of the Tennessee Valley, the TVA's several dozen dams were also meant to bring electricity to the region and, thereby, "social uplift" to people living in a "seemingly antediluvian world of sorghum mills, wood-fired stoves, and one-room schoolhouses," writes Tom Vanderbilt, a Brooklyn-based writer.

The problem was, the hardscrabble people of the river basin weren't keen on changing their way of life, and Americans were of two minds about whether public utilities should be government owned. To court a skeptical public, Hungarian-born, Bauhaus-affiliated architect Roland Wank—now unjustly sunk into relative obscurity—was commissioned to head the TVA

design team, and he set about to woo people with an avant-garde vision of unornamented efficiency reflected in "brute, geometric architecture."

Wank "imbued a technological imperative with beauty and humanity," writes Vanderbilt, "and created structures that, as modern as they must have seemed at the time, still resonate today." The dams, approached on winding roads through

the Appalachian foothills, featured panoramic visitor centers and marble-and-aluminum powerhouse lobbies, and were "veritable theme parks of progress and utopian ideals." They attracted national acclaim and eventually became sites of pilgrimage for tourists and foreign dignitaries alike. Architects such as Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier visited, as did Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the TVA powerhouses and many of the old visitor centers were closed to the public, but this act was merely a coda to the erosion of the TVA

dams' national eminence. Automation, budgetary belt-tightening, and changing political winds have rendered the dams little more than historical relics, and the TVA has become a "watered-down utility company" that derives most of its power from coal-fired and nuclear power plants.

But in the challenge to which the TVA's soaring dams rose in the Depression era, Vanderbilt sees a call to arms for the future, particularly as the United States grapples with catastrophes on the scale of Hurricane Katrina: "We inhabit a diminished age in which grand public works are supposed to be replaced by small private acts of faith and profit. The TVA was born of crisis, and its architecture is a monument to an enlightened response."

EXCERPT

Through Art's Lens

One of the things that contributed to the demise of modernism was the preposterous notion that art itself is an encoded system that only scholars can properly decipher. But we know that for two millennia art has been an integral part of society's everyday life, accessible on many different levels. Today, we need help in finding our way back to that kind of understanding between artists and public. After decades of proselytizing the hermeneutics of Foucault and Derrida, having achieved what has turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory (the end of art), the cultural elite now find themselves confronting an abyss that leaves the West spiritually defenseless. . . . Hopefully, we are rediscovering that the arts help us see—that art is a microcosm, a lens, to God, the universe, civilization; that art is a connection to the eternal, the true, and the beautiful.

—JAMES F. COOPER, editor and publisher of *American Arts Quarterly*, in the Fall 2005 issue