
INTRODUCTION



Photographs of the Great Depression fill our repository of images of the American past, giving us a snapshot not only of the material characteristics of that era but of its values as well. Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother," perhaps the best known picture of the period, combines the fortitude associated with farmers with the pathos of struggle, bringing forward the mythical yeoman farmer into the unsettling circumstances of the twentieth century. Such photographs have shaped our view of the 1930s. Most of them were produced through the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration (first called the Resettlement Administration), which was led by Roy Stryker, who sought nothing less than a detailed, panoramic documentation of American life by some of the best photographers of the era, such as Lange and Walker Evans. Their mission was to photograph rural Americans, to capture the receding of the country's agricultural sector, as farmers moved westward and toward urban centers.¹

While the photographs helped make this passing of the agricultural era symbolic—and nostalgic—they also inevitably caught the irrepressible spread of urbanization, the march to the city. The early decades of the twentieth century marked a demographic shift in the United States from rural to urban, with the 1920 census revealing that the majority of Americans lived in an urban environment for the first time in the country's history. The Farm Security Administration (FSA) charged photographers to reckon with this change, to grasp a previous era and its values at a time when anonymous crowds, mechanized routines, and dense living encroached upon the countryside. Although

Stryker and the photographers he directed did not set out to capture the urban element of the transformation, it was unavoidable. “As the FSA file seizes the scene of the changing today, it will have within itself, and in proper perspective, the scene of yesterday,” proclaimed John Vachon, who assisted Stryker in setting up the project and later became one of its more prolific photographers.²

But if the scene of yesterday was captured in “the changing today,” so too was the scene of tomorrow—the propulsion to the city. Pictures of migrants showed a nation on the move, not just *from* the farm but *to* the city. Work, home, family, neighbors, leisure—these general categories of everyday life that shaped the shooting scripts of the FSA photographers—meant that pictures were taken of houses piled atop one another, factories and warehouses, movie houses and swimming pools, as well as a growing web of transportation that included streets, highways, cars, buses, trains, and planes. When the FSA documentation project was transferred to the Office of War Information (OWI) in July 1942, the pictures of cities increased as the aim shifted to showing a country ready for war, proud of its ability to mobilize and fight, and armed to defend its core principles.³

At its grandest, the scope of the project encompassed nothing less than the entire country, its past, present, and future, its emptied plains, struggling towns, and bustling cities. By necessity, Stryker narrowed that embracing scope to focus on the small town, which he saw as the “cross-roads where the land meets the city, where the farm meets commerce and industry.”⁴ This perspective reflected the influence of sociologist Robert Lynd, who, in his 1929 study of a small American city—later identified as Muncie, Indiana—sought to reveal the patterns of daily life by conducting interviews, analyzing demographic data, and knitting together values and beliefs alongside work, leisure, and community activities. Stryker sought out Lynd near the beginning of the FSA project, in early 1936, recognizing in the documentary detail of Lynd’s book, *Middletown*, goals similar to his own for the FSA. Lynd quickly saw the opportunity the project posed and spurred Stryker to focus cameras on small-town life and core American values such as community and fortitude. On the train ride back to Washington, D.C., after his meeting with Lynd, Stryker wrote up a draft of a shooting script on small towns that was to become a permanent directive for all photographers in the field. It suggested photographs of everything from fire hydrants to “menus in windows” and “Post Offices—Unusual—humorous.”⁵

While there were notable similarities between the investigative principles underlying *Middletown* and the FSA project, Lynd’s publication of a follow-up study less than ten years after the original, *Middletown in Transition* (pub-

lished in 1937), betrayed unintentional parallels. Lynd was fully steeped in finishing the book when he met with Stryker, and he was woeful about the effects of the economic depression—and urbanization. Between the investigations in 1925 and those in 1935, Middletown's population had increased from around 36,000 to almost 50,000, with most of the growth occurring between 1925 and 1931. The small city had lost the town at its center. New buildings, bridges, an airport, a municipal swimming pool, brighter store fronts, more traffic lights: *Middletown in Transition* chronicled the social changes that accompanied the physical and demographic ones and, much like the FSA/OWI project, captured the range in the change, from town to city, from rural to urban.⁶ The change may have dismayed both Lynd and Stryker, but they—and the projects they directed—could not make the march retreat.

Taken collectively, the FSA/OWI photographs of urbanization demonstrate the heyday of city life, when the country turned to the city with numeric force and expectancy.⁷ Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Americans had looked askance at cities, more often seeing them as places full of problems—strangeness, duplicity, grime, and scandal—rather than places of equanimity and promising refuge. But alongside the lingering uneasiness about urban life in the early part of the twentieth century, cities took on new sheen as the site of mingling, opportunity, and hope. Written materials from various New Deal agencies, such as interviews conducted by the Federal Writers' Project and portrayals in the American Guide Series of states and cities, substantiate this brighter view of urban life, presenting detailed descriptions of what cities offered and the characters who resided there. The possibilities newly attributed to cities had their humble side, most evident in the photographs of the harsh housing conditions of the urban poor, as well as banality, shown in the increasing mechanization of city life. But the textual and visual materials relay the relentless sway toward urban life throughout the country: the density of people, buildings, cars, machinery; the mixing of strangers; the noise; the overriding of local culture by national culture; the pairing of hard work and raucous leisure. It is the city that represented the hope and renewal for the future rather than the farm itself or nostalgia for that rural past.

Our Cities: Their Role in the National Economy, a 1937 government report, confirmed the demographic change and analyzed its ramifications. The 1930 census classified places with 2,500 people as “urban,” which may seem quite low by today's standards of concentration, but the report noted that the imperfect definition masked other demographic changes that coincided with urban living, such as a decrease in birth rate, a rise in average age, increasing mobility, and the consolidation of industry, trade, and wealth in metropolitan

areas. The substantive claim of urbanization lay in the numbers of people who resided in the ninety-six metropolitan districts that contained at least 100,000 inhabitants—45 percent of the population.⁸ More indisputable than the numeric argument, the report linked rural and urban areas, arguing for their vital interdependence, although with the dominant flow going toward the cities: “the conditions of rural life today are therefore the preconditions of urban living tomorrow.”⁹ The report defended the link and the trend by noting the accompanying change in attitude toward cities:

The city has seemed at times the despair of America, but at others to be the Nation’s hope, the battleground of democracy. Surely in the long run, the Nation’s destiny will be profoundly affected by the cities which have two-thirds of its population and its wealth. There is a liberty of development in isolation and wide spaces, but there is also freedom in the many-sided life of the city where each may find his own kind. There is democracy in the scattered few, but there is also democracy in the thick crowd with its vital impulse and its insistent demand for a just participation in the gains of our civilization. There is fertility and creation in the rich soil of the broad countryside, but there is also fertility and creativeness in forms of industry, art, personality, emerging even from the city streets and reaching toward the sky.¹⁰

With economic, demographic, social, and political trends oriented toward the city, Americans began to set their aspirations there as well.

The physical and demographic changes cloaked a more subtle shift: a new way of life forged in cities. In the early twentieth century, cities sparkled with vibrancy—flappers, cabarets, bohemians—which celebrated a lifestyle if not yet a way of life. By the 1930s, with the flash dimming, cities offered an allure less about excess and more about acceptance. The shift prompted attempts to define this new mode of living. Differentiating it from industrialism and capitalism, sociologists such as Louis Wirth and intellectuals such as Lewis Mumford focused on habits and attitudes that accompanied but could not be contained within the numbers that defined this new urban era. If size and density lay at the foundation of cities, such factors mattered less as isolated statistics than in their impact on daily life. Wirth described the heterogeneity of urban life that made city dwellers less dependent on particular individuals and more involved in a greater number of groups. The close living and working together of dissimilar people created a need for more order in a social world through such apparatuses as clocks and traffic signals. And the more atomized

collective life relied on visual recognition for personal alignment in the world, both physical and social. Seeing oneself meant seeing—and categorizing—people and places.¹¹

Photographs, then, had a powerful role in creating and sustaining this new urbanism. Through an art form closely intertwined with urbanization since the nineteenth century, Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine in the early twentieth century employed photographs of cities to focus attention on brutish living conditions, while Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand displayed the city as a modernist spectacle. This urban focus was not surprising given that photographers themselves were, in general, people who already believed—and dwelled—in the city. This was also true of the FSA/OWI photographers, who knew little about rural life, a perspective that suited the project's initial aim of conveying the values and difficulties of the agricultural sector to city folks. "Everything seemed fresh and exciting" in the rural areas of the country, as photographer and "provincial New Yorker" Arthur Rothstein put it.¹² The city shaped what the photographers saw and ended up, at times, being the object at the end of the camera lens. Dorothea Lange described the change from being a portrait photographer to being a documentarian as a conversion prompted by the life outside her San Francisco studio:

One morning as I was making a proof at the south window, I watched an unemployed young workman coming up the street. He came to the corner, stopped and stood there a little while. Behind him were the waterfront and the wholesale districts; to his left was the financial district; ahead was Chinatown and the Hall of Justice; to his right were the flophouses and the Barbary Coast. What was he to do? Which way was he to go?¹³

Lange left the studio and followed the man, eventually snapping in that walk one of her most famous photographs—men in a breadline—and found her photographic eye. Just a few years later, she was employed by the FSA, traveling around the country, even though she "didn't know a mule from a tractor."¹⁴ Photographers found their livelihood, ambition, colleagues—and vision—in the city, and they reflected the views of those already ensconced there: progress, survival, and inspiration lay in the dense maze of people, industry, and commerce.¹⁵

While movies emerged as a new visual mode of urban life in the 1930s, photographs still carried potency. The still image could gather lasting iconic strength that the moving image could not. A 1968 exhibit of FSA photographs

of urban life demonstrated this enduring power. In an effort to resuscitate more innocent urban images at a time when cities were burning and crumbling at an appalling pace, the exhibit put forth a broad definition of urbanism—"the hand of man maintaining control over the forces of nature"—and featured fewer cities and more towns. Less notable than the actual photographs, however, was the admission of the urban element in FSA's project, which had been defined and promoted as capturing only rural and small-town life. "I wanted to get more city pictures, but we just couldn't get them. That was a little bit further than we could dare go," Roy Stryker noted in the catalog, alluding to the thematic concerns that structured the financing of the project under the Farm Security Administration.¹⁶

The mission of the project was one thing, the result another. Stryker and the photographers sought to make concrete to city folks the devastation of rural life, yet the pictures also conveyed the dawning commonness of urban life. The Depression progressed incrementally—not a dramatic instance of change, such as a hurricane or a fire, but a wearing down into habit that became difficult to see in its full consequence. Photographs mattered, then, in seeing this transformation. Both to people then and to us now, they show the depth of the impact of the Depression and urbanization on daily life throughout the country, giving in grainy detail the look and feel of living in dirty tenements, communing in public parks, and being surrounded—and anonymous—on a crowded sidewalk. In an era when words were the primary medium of news—via radio, newspapers, and conversation—the potency of an image stood out. The migration from the dustbowls as well as the dense tangle of city life became certain and tangible in the static, iconic images of the FSA/OWI collection. The photographs focused the statistics and words of this societal change, attaching human images to the numeric and verbal ones. These are people and places captured in time, fixed but full, caught in a moment that holds the push of the past and the propulsion into the future.

The array of urban life presented in the almost 170,000 photographs of the FSA/OWI collection from 1935 to 1944 ranges from portraits of taxi drivers to parades, train stations, and housing conditions. The photographs offer ample record of the material of daily life in the city—the clothes, workplaces, signage, shopping, transportation—but they also convey broader themes that structured urbanization during the era and form the categories of images in this book: Intersection, Traffic, High Life and Low Life, The City in the Country, and Citizens. These categories attach broad characterizations of modern urban life to a historical moment. Traffic, for instance, relays the congestion at

a city's core, newly mechanized in the 1930s with the wider distribution and use of cars. The FSA/OWI project was a seminal moment in the history of photography in the United States, but the photographs also serve as evidence of this moment in urbanization, visualizing the look and feel of the transformation that formed the basis of our city life today. Descriptions from the photographers, accounts from the American Guide Series of states and cities, as well as interviews conducted by the Federal Writers' Project amplify these themes, adding another layer of interpretation and magnifying the impact of this change. The Federal Writers' Project, one of four sections of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) aimed at employing the nation's artists (the others were Art, Theater, and Music), paralleled the aim of the FSA/OWI in that writers and interviewers intended to amass a holistic vision of the country, often highlighting its diversity but presenting a unified picture nonetheless. The American Guide Series, in particular, brought together a collective of writers and researchers that gave a comprehensive overview of the history, geography, demographics, amusements, and unique attractions of a state or city. The WPA's bureaucratic organization (federal oversight of regional and local offices) as well as its ideological orientation toward unity reflected the values of most New Deal agencies and even of the era itself.¹⁷

The guides and the photographs obscured the political nature of much of the artistic and cultural work of the era, depicting a desperate and tempestuous time through a more harmonious frame. In government-funded ventures, politics had vital consequences, as the Federal Theatre Project discovered in 1939 when its funding was stopped largely because accusations of communism and socialism shriveled congressional support. The government-sponsored artistic works of the era, however, were at the cautious end of a more comprehensive movement to infuse the arts with social purpose, from the songs of Woody Guthrie to the films of Will Rogers and the jazz of Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington.¹⁸ Stryker negotiated the FSA/OWI photographers through this political landscape by keeping the focus on ordinary folks and largely staying away from the potent issues of the day, including race relations. The pictures, some quite stark, remained more impressionistic than pointed.

That suggestive rather than targeted approach appears to have guided the appearance of cities in the photographs as well. Specific cities dominated (New York, Chicago, Baltimore), while others received rather little attention (Philadelphia, Milwaukee, San Francisco, Miami), even as the emergence of certain regional centers (Phoenix and Omaha) marked the shift from eastern to western seaboard.¹⁹ As the mission of the FSA project changed in the OSI years to document the wartime build-up, images increased of industrial centers—generally in the east, although certain cities in the west stood out for their

growing defense industry (Seattle) or for their specific social repercussions, such as the resettlement of Japanese Americans (Los Angeles). While this scattershot approach may have guided the photography of urban scenes, the cataloguing of the photographs solidified the prominence of them. The classification system developed in the early 1940s enumerated general categories for filing that began with “The Land—The Background of Civilization” immediately followed by “Cities and Towns.” The entire corpus of photographs was broken down by region, with each region featuring file drawers full of pictures of “Cities and Towns,” narrowed into a myriad of focused designations such as city streets, stores, waterfronts, parks, transportation, religion, and intellectual and creative activity. In a search through the physical files of photographs at the Library of Congress and the online catalog of images, it is easy to see that urbanization spread unevenly and differently, but with a striking sureness.²⁰

As I searched for the societal story in these photographs, searing images of aesthetic quality sprinkled throughout could not be ignored. My final selection took into account both the representativeness of the content as well as the quality of the image. If the pictures represent a range of visual precision and artistry, then they likely reveal the ways we see in everyday life, absorbing mundane, blurry scenes alongside those of startling clarity and effect. In this focus on the customary and the habitual, the FSA/OWI photographs made urban life common. Photographers who followed then pushed off that benchmark to present the unvarnished and the strange, such as Weegee’s (Arthur Fellig’s) view of the *Naked City*, which appeared in 1945. By then, the FSA/OWI collection had trained our eyes to look more closely at scenes around us and to revel in the profundity of even our most casual moments.

Cities in the United States have been and remain gateways to participation in the world. As transportation, communication, cultural, and work hubs, they animate the nation, reeling in to them people from the country and other parts of the world. If their force has been magnetic, it has not been undisputed or constant. Even as early as the end of the 1930s, suburbs became the new vision of a better life. Federal and private investment turned dramatically to support growth in the suburbs after the war, from the mass housing tracts of Levittown and other such developments to the federal highway act that constructed roads to get around cities and to outlying areas. That investment prompted the decline of the city center, which became overwhelming by the 1960s, a devastation that has been unevenly overcome only by the end of the twentieth century.

If the role of cities in world affairs has come to be a tenser one since the 1930s and ’40s, through the crisis of the 1960s and ’70s to today’s terrorists’

schemes, it is useful to remember when and how cities have also been the focus of opportunity and aspiration. Before the beginning of the Cold War and the boom of the suburbs, cities offered the hope that work could be found and could be satisfying, leisure could be exhilarating, and strangers and strangeness could be made common. We may look askance at that wide-eyed embrace now—knowing what has come after—but cities may glow brightly in our eye again. The deepening environmental and fiscal crises have tarnished the benefits of exurban and suburban areas. The dense, compact, and resource-efficient habits of urban life may prompt a renewed embrace of urbanism.

The photographs in this collection relay the daily embrace of urban life in the 1930s and early 1940s. They give grain, tone, and detail to the pronouncements and the larger societal swing toward life in the metropolis, whether in residence or in the imagination. As a passage from the Cincinnati guide put it, the city “is compounded of the hundreds of familiar pictures that day by day seep into the consciousness of those who live here”:

Sunlit hills and window panes twinkling down the end of a street. Shore lights and moonglow on the river at night. Rows of rooftops up the valleys like stone flagging among the grassy tops of trees. Gaslit streets lined with tall hedges and trees so thick that sidewalks long ago were laid around them. Bright rock gardens and sloping lawns. Massive brick and stone homes, some high above the street, others far below in some wild and lonely ravine.

Women in house dresses leaning far out over window sills to catch a few gasps of air in humid summer afternoons. Writhing children, sputtering and laughing under the cold spray of a sprinkler attached to a sidewalk fire plug. Plump housewives armed with baskets and shopping bags waddling through crowded market houses. Men with lunch kits walking up steep flights of concrete steps to their homes. Families with noisy children bound for Coney Island amusement park on the river steamer, *Island Queen*. Shoppers waving familiarly to passersby across the way on downtown streets. Groups walking down to Old World eating places in basements. Couples sipping brew and ale in outdoor beer gardens. Men in formal wear and stunning women in evening gowns trailing over to Music Hall for the symphony. Urchins throwing pop bottles at the umpire over at Crosley Field.²¹

“That is Cincinnati” ends the passage. It might as well have said, “This is a city.”