

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART  
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REMARKS MADE BY DAVID E. LILIENTHAL, DIRECTOR OF TVA,  
AT THE MEMBERS PREVIEW OF THE EXHIBITION OF TVA  
ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART,  
TUESDAY, APRIL 29, 1941.

At the outset let me say quite candidly that we of the TVA are proud and happy that the Museum of Modern Art should see fit in this signal way to recognize TVA structures as noteworthy examples of modern American architecture and design. There are some 20,000 men and women building and operating the TVA; I can assure you that all of us, all of the men who at this hour are drilling into bed-rock, operating the huge shovels or bending over drafting boards sense the importance of what is happening here today in New York City hundreds of miles from our job. And so we express our thanks to the officers and trustees of the Museum, because this exhibit of modern public architecture will have a stimulating effect upon the minds and imagination of many thousands of our fellow citizens.

We are here to witness an exhibit of design and architecture; therefore this is not the occasion for extended remarks about the Tennessee Valley Authority generally, about its broad purposes as a demonstration of modernized democracy in action. Nor is it an appropriate time to relate how the income and the living standards in a wide area have risen, how new life has come to sterile lands, how in eight years in the place of despair there is renewed hope for millions of people. Nor should I yield to the temptation--a very strong one indeed--to tell you how TVA has speedily mobilized its forces for urgent defense needs of our land and of Britain as well; how TVA has gone into action to prepare for defense of these shores and at the same time and by the same facilities is making ready for the hazardous days when this crisis is finally past.

What I shall talk of, but quite briefly, is how it came about that in these TVA dams and buildings there is a distinctive and modern form and beauty. For you have observed, I am sure, that

there runs through all these structures a single theme. Such things do not, of course, happen by pure accident.

How this did happen is not a very pretentious story and it can be simply told. In a few weeks it will be eight years since TVA came into being. In June of 1933 we were under feverish pressure to rush into the actual construction of what was to be--and now is--the most extensive series of engineering works ever built by the United States. We realized that we were building not for our time alone, but structures that would stand for centuries, a thousand years or more perhaps. The dams must be the finest flower of modern engineering skill; that was clear of course. But what of their esthetic quality, their form? These monuments would reflect for centuries the standard of American culture and the purpose of American life of our time. Should that be passed over as of little importance? We asked whether we should follow the quite general practice of building the structures, and then adding some decorations to make them "pretty". Should we raise up monoliths to set their giant shoulders against the floods of a thousand years, and then embellish their strength with the doo-dads and columns of a civilization now gone for a thousand years?

Those questions we tried to answer, eight years ago, when TVA was still only an idea, before a yard of concrete had been poured; to what effect we answered them the exhibit you have here seen has told you.

Even beyond such considerations as these was this thought that concerned us deeply back in 1933. Millions of Americans, we told ourselves, will see these structures. They will see in them a kind of token of the virility and vigor of democracy, of its concern for living men and generations yet to come. We wanted these dams to have the honest beauty of a fine tool; for TVA was a tool to do a job for men in a democracy. When people see these dams that they own and were built for them we wanted their hearts to be moved with pride. We wanted them to look upon the flag flying over these structures and feel a renewed love of their country and faith in its future. In this impulse we were right, as it turns out; for today at this breathless moment in the history of this nation we need greatly to declare again and again the faith we have in the future of America. And it is just this faith that the TVA project presents in a form that the eye can see and the

imagination of men dwell upon.

There were practical difficulties to overcome. We had to search for architects who were not in a constant delirium of nostalgia for the past, men who could interpret the functional strength the engineers would build into these structures; and we had to find engineers willing to collaborate with architects with open and eager minds. And then there was the administrative task, and not an easy one at first, of welding these two skills together into the partnership of voluntary spirits. The exhibit you have seen tells how well that union succeeded.

We like to think of the building of the TVA as an anonymous undertaking. This is not to say that individuals have not touched it with their special talent and genius. Of course that is true; and without the great abilities of such men as Chief Engineer Theodore Parker, or Chief Architect Roland Wank or General Manager Gordon Clapp the result would have been quite different and doubtless inferior. But you will search in vain for bronze tablets on any TVA dams, tablets listing the names of engineers or architects, or members of the board of directors for that matter. Nor is this undertaking built to glorify the fame or augment the power of any man. There is one phrase and only one you will find written over the doors of these structures; in large letters is this simple legend: BUILT FOR THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES.