Exhibitions

Designing Tomorrow: America’s World’s Fairs of the 1930s

The American world’s fairs of the Depression years were over-the-top, optimistic projects that made future-gazing a cultural staple. According to the fairs’ organizers and promoters, such looking ahead could bolster people’s sagging faith in the country’s economic and political systems. These fairs decanted a messy decade into neat packages of hope, dramatized the shape of things to come, and distorted or denied social reality to accommodate corporate America’s consumerist utopias.

Creating a museum exhibition decades later, out of such extravagantly hopeful projects, poses a robust intellectual challenge. How does one recreate the particular mood of the fairs in their historic times without overinvesting in their seductive messages? Balancing an “authentic” representation of past events with the unavoidable lessons of hindsight is a daunting task.

The exhibition at the National Building Museum titled Designing Tomorrow: America’s World’s Fairs of the 1930s deftly negotiated this challenge. It rendered momentarily irrelevant the question of whether or not one left the show with a deep and nuanced knowledge of 1930s America by presenting a visually pleasurable array of artifacts from six Depression-era fairs: the Century of Progress International Exposition, held in Chicago in 1933–34; the California Pacific International Exposition, staged in San Diego in 1935–36; the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas of 1936; the Great Lakes Exposition in Cleveland of 1936–37; the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco of 1935–39; and the New York World’s Fair of 1939–40. Bringing together original objects, drawings, posters, souvenirs, multimedia, reproductions, and even a replica of Westinghouse’s Electro robot from the 1939 New York fair, the show transports the audience to what Burton Benedict calls the world’s fair’s cloistered world of utopian fantasy. Looking at all the artifacts, one cannot but experience a sublime attachment to a historical period that reveals itself through a refracting (rather than reflecting) lens of populist dreams and corporatist aspirations.

It is now relatively easy to overlook the power of a new gadget to elicit wondering reactions, especially when we are saturated with technology and have lost the innocence of fascination. Corporate America understood this power during the 1930s. If corporations fabricated the make-believe world of a tomorrow filled with fantastic machines, it is only indicative of, to paraphrase Roland Marchand, their shrewd understanding of how new appliances could both advertise and predict the good life. The curators of Designing Tomorrow commendably recreate the sense of wonderment new technology could spawn in the 1930s. As the visitors chart their ways through various sections, gawking at objects, they unconsciously repeat the journey of spectators in Norman Bel Geddes’s Futurama, with its gee-whiz gaze at the streamlined future.

Because the six fairs are presented neither chronologically nor individually, but intermingled under seven overarching themes, we are compelled to see the larger patterns behind the conceptualization of these fairs and in the attitudes that shaped them. The first section introduces a brief history of world’s fairs and Depression America’s economic anxiety, to which the six fairs—supported by civic leaders, businessmen, and Federal officials—responded with technological bravado and a panegyric to a modern life of comfort and convenience. The next section, “A Fair-Going Nation,” explains how, according to the exhibition’s leaflet, during the 1930s “American expositions beckoned tens of millions of visitors with awe-inspiring displays and the promise of a better tomorrow.” The next three installments, “Building a Better Tomorrow,” “Better Ways to Move,” and “Better Ways to Live” showcase the role of architecture, transportation machines, and modern appliances in creating an ideal world of streamlined efficiency. “Better Times” then chronicles an impending utopia in which new inventions as diverse as nylon stockings and television were everyday commodities. Finally, “Legacies of the Fair” introduces the ways these fairs, notwithstanding their ephemerality and joyous utopianism, familiarized the American everyman with modernist architectural styles and the appliances that would soon become commonplace.

This much is rather uncomplicated, as the exhibition embeds the fairs in their historical time (the primary objective of the show’s curators, according to one docent). It allowed visitors to see the artifacts without the a posteriori intellectual embroidery that our evolved eyes weave around the artifacts of the past. But what is the point of an exhibition if it falls short of offering new insights? The curators of Designing Tomorrow address this question by including under each theme a section they call “See Both Sides.” Here, instead of just hearing the official propaganda, we can listen as well to the fairs’ detractors.

This is where the exhibition aspires to loftier goals than presenting a predictable visual feast. The curators juxtaposed the fairs’ prognostications of a rosy tomorrow that airbrushed the Depression era’s social pathologies, with dissenting voices, which speak of the moral hollowness of fairs’ unflinching faith in a shapeless future. This is a caution to the visitor about the curatorial problems of revisiting history. There is no one heroic narrative to which to return, now
that we understand that the fairs’ sweet gospel of progress was not uncontested. In a way “See Both Sides” is a debate, if fictional, between Grover A. Whalen, the president of the 1939 New York World’s Fair Incorporation, and the writer E. B. White. In the 1939 fair’s official guidebook, Whalen eulogized the immediacy of a World of Tomorrow that “you and I and our millions of fellow citizens can build from the best of the tools available to us today.” But for White that future world was a bare-knuckle, top-down corporate extravaganza. He wryly noted: “There is no talking back in Tomorrow. You are expected to take it or leave it alone.”

The fairs of the 1930s were full of half-hidden contradictions. They engaged, as Robert W. Rydell suggests, eugenicist rhetoric to promote healthy white American families, and African Americans were systematically excluded from the official portrayal of the fairs’ idealized universe. In another instance of conflicting moods, Gilbert Rohde’s cool modernist furnishings inside George Fred Keck’s House of Tomorrow enthralled visitors to the Chicago Exposition, at nearly the same time that Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother and Walker Evans’ Sharecropper Family captured the country’s economic woes and held them up for examination.

“See Both Sides” conveys an uncomfortable sense of artifice. It gives a false impression that dissenting voices were normal within the rhetorical construction of these fairs and that the fairs’ publicity machines acknowledged these voices. On the contrary, although this has not been made clear, the juxtaposition is between how the curators chose to see the fairs retroactively and how their discursive formation was originally shaped. The official leaflet of Designing Tomorrow includes, alas, only the happy conclusion of each of the themed sections of the exhibition, without a trace of the rich ambivalence expressed in “See Both Sides.”

Although, Designing Tomorrow is an enthralling exhibition, there is an ironic twist in it being shown in Washington, D.C. None of the six fairs took place in the nation’s capital. If the avowed goal of the fairs was to revive faith in the country’s economic ethos, why was none of them brought to the doorstep of the New Deal political machine? Most probably this was because, as Warren Susman claims, the corporate sponsors of these fairs singled out the people, rather than the government, as the most effective voice to advance their vision of a consumerist utopia. It is instructive to recall Whalen’s dedication of the 1939 New York World’s Fair: “This is your Fair, built for you and dedicated to you.”

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Related Publication
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