A Most Popular World’s Fair

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AMERICA’S INNOCENCE

BY LAWRENCE R. SAMUEL
The 1964–1965 New York World’s Fair was one of the most popular fairs in history. But because of what it tried to ignore, it also marked the end of innocence for American culture—and for major world’s fairs.

Next time you’re in New York City, take a walk in the park—not Central Park, but one that’s half again as big and is even more of a central park, located in the geographic and population bull’s eye of the city. It’s Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens, where, before soccer players, picnickers, and the best tennis players on the planet took it over, the last great world’s fair took place, and where, in two seasons between April and October 1964 and 1965, some 52 million people from the four corners of the earth gathered. The park is an enduring legacy of the Fair, transformed from the dismal “valley of ashes” that F. Scott Fitzgerald described in *The Great Gatsby* into a beautiful place that is the pride of the borough.

**A Day at the Fair**

Attendance at the 1964–1965 New York World’s Fair made it not only one of the most popular world’s fairs, but perhaps one of the most popular events of any kind ever to be held. Consider what a typical fair-goer could experience in a single day in Flushing Meadows:

In between seeing color television for the first time at the RCA Pavilion and taking a ride in a brand-new car from Ford called the Mustang, you could stop by Bell Telephone’s pavilion to try the Picturephone, which lets you see (and be seen by) the person you’re speaking to. Your next stop might be the IBM Pavilion to inspect a new business machine called the computer (which has caused a huge fuss), followed by a visit to the General Electric pavilion to watch a real demonstration of thermonuclear fusion, in which a million amperes of “free energy” are released. Then, after strolling through the Space Park to check out a few rocket ships that have actually been in orbit—quite a thrill in these heady days of the race to the moon—you might go back in time to see a few of the Dead Sea Scrolls, followed by Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, especially since this is the first time the masterpiece has left the Vatican since it was sculpted 465 years ago. Then, just for fun, you might swing over to Pepsi’s pavilion to climb aboard a new ride called “It’s a Small World,” built by Walt Disney, and then over to the Illinois Pavilion to see another Disney creation, an eerily life-like (or just plain eerie) robotic Abraham Lincoln that looks, speaks, gestures, and even smiles like the dead president. Finally, for sustenance, you could head over to the Chun King Inn for its seven-course dinner (which, now that you’re nearly flat broke, is thankfully just 99 cents), and, on the way out, sample one of those Bel-Gem waffles that everybody says are the best darn things at the Fair.

**The Ugly Duckling of Global Expositions**

I was lucky enough to have had such a day at Flushing Meadows: an eight-year-old’s firsthand knowledge of the incredible array of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes that was the Fair. However, even though Fair officials predicted that it would be the greatest single event in history, it was also the last great world’s fair. The 1964–1965 New York World’s Fair was one of the most popular fairs, but perhaps one of the most popular events of any kind ever to be held.
By sidestepping the uninviting near future for a more palatable far-distant one, the Fair offered its millions of visitors an oasis of faith, optimism, hope, and confidence that utopia (or something like it) was not an entirely lost cause.
becoming a nightmare, although global harmony, or at least Moses's version of it, ruled at the Fair. From the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, to Operation Rolling Thunder in March 1965, to the start of “search and destroy” missions in June of that year, Vietnam was on the minds of most Americans exactly at the time when millions were gathering in Flushing Meadows in celebration of international brotherhood. As more troops were sent to Southeast Asia through 1964 and 1965, organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society marched and protested against the escalation of the war. Yet against the backdrop of these conflicts and the added social unrest of increasingly fuzzy gender roles and an unprecedented divide along generational lines, Robert Moses created a space that was essentially free from the turmoil of the mid-1960s utopia—or something like it.

Rattled by this immense upheaval, American visitors in particular found the Fair's cultural swagger and bravado to be a welcome anchor that provided stability and ballast. For the overwhelming majority of visitors, the Fair's over-the-top commerciality and conservative tone were not liabilities, as critics have argued, but assets that contributed to its tremendous popularity. The Fair's imaginary universe looked backward as much as forward, offering visitors a bridge over the troubled waters of the times. (Guy Lombardo, a personal favorite of Robert Moses, led the unofficial house band at the Fair.) The post-World War II world may have had its anxieties, but after twenty years at least they were known, familiar, and contained. By contrast, the post-postwar world represented completely uncharted territory that the nation seemed unprepared to navigate. By sidestepping the uninviting near future for a more palatable far-distant one, the Fair offered its millions of visitors an oasis of faith, optimism, hope, and confidence that utopia (or something like it) was not an entirely lost cause. The American Dream was still very much alive in those 646 acres in Queens.

Walt Disney’s theme park in Anaheim had already been open for a decade; Disney wanted to open his second park on the Fair’s site after its run. As the quintessential fantasy world that offered visitors refuge from the less-than-magical realities of everyday life, the Magic Kingdom provided an ideal blueprint for Robert Moses to follow in building his own interpretation of the happiest place on earth. And he succeeded in creating a safe bubble that was virtually free from worldly concerns in order to make the Fair a popular success. Chaos may have reigned in the boardrooms of the World’s Fair Corporation and in the offices of elected officials, but precious little of it could be detected on the fairgrounds, where nations sang in harmony, corporations existed to produce things that made life better, and the future looked brighter than ever. The same formula of success—science and technology—that had proven so reliable over the last few decades would lead America to an even more abundant promised land, this one made up of limitless energy, computerized efficiency, and push-button convenience.

In short, the make-believe universe of the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair was the final gasp of American innocence, the last time and place in which the harsh realities of everyday life could be ignored on such a large scale.