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An international forum on the future of cities

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Quietly, gently determined
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Tim Winter

On close inspection, world’s fairs tell us much about the major events and changes that have shaped the world over the last 150 years or so. They stand as important markers of history, charting the rise and fall of empires and the ongoing shifts in the global ordering of power. As public events reaching huge audiences, they also reflect the aims and anxieties, the beliefs and values of their time. And yet, surprisingly, despite all the profound political, technological and social changes that have occurred since the first world’s fair was held in London in 1851, the formula and concept of these events have remained remarkably familiar. To trace the history of world’s fairs, then, is to trace a series of interweaving departures and continuities, as we shall see over the course of the following pages.

Accordingly, the main body of the chapter is divided into four thematic sections, Imperial nations, For the public, Thinking space and Progress. Together, these detail some of the key trends that have defined the evolution of world’s fairs and highlight how individual events have spoken to the issues of their moment in history. Although these sections move back and forth chronologically, the overall thrust is towards the contemporary. Finally, the chapter pays particular attention to the history of China’s engagement with world’s fairs, both within the country itself and in those fairs held around the world since 1851.

Imperial nations

World’s fairs and universal expositions emerged in Europe at a time of imperial strength and national confidence. Between May and October 1851, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, latterly known as the Great Exhibition, harvested the success, ambition and optimism of a Britain entering the Victorian era and an age of industrialized modernity. The event was ground breaking in a number of ways, and it captured the imagination of scholars, bureaucrats and the general public alike, creating a legacy that would influence Britain, its empire and other European colonial powers for decades to come. Local opposition to the construction of a vast exhibition hall led to the cancelling of an agreed design of brick with a large
dome. Joseph Paxton’s idea for a cast-iron structure covered with glass emerged as a last-minute solution, being both quick to build and easy to disassemble once the event was over. This radical use of iron demonstrated how buildings could be built on an industrial scale, as well as the power of engineering as a new form of knowledge, an idea that would culminate in the Eiffel Tower, a 1,000-foot-high centrepiece for Paris’s 1889 Exposition Universelle. Back in London, vast expanses of glass (from which the Crystal Palace took its name) enabled light to be shed, both metaphorically and literally, on to sprawling displays of machinery – the material culture of a new age of industrial might and technological modernity. Alongside technical marvels such as telegraphs, steam hammers and calculating machines were gigantic vases from Russia, French tapestries and the famous Koh-i-Noor Diamond. But it was the objects of an industrial age that provided the Great Exhibition with its real legacy, enabling the event to be the flagship for ideas of progress, free trade and economic development (see Davis 2008: 9–14; see also Greenhalgh 1988/2000).

Not surprisingly, America was the first country to replicate the international exhibition model, holding a similar event in New York in 1853. Once again, iron and steel were used to build a ‘crystal palace’, this time designed in the shape of a Greek cross. The event attracted much fewer than the 8 million or so visitors to London and closed in November 1854 with a debt of US$300,000. The following year, 1855, France would hold its first Exposition Universelle, an event that effectively extended and elaborated upon smaller industrial exhibitions held across the country in preceding decades. More than just a derivative of London, the Paris Exposition gave much greater attention to the fine arts, with a dedicated pavilion displaying 5,000 works by artists from twenty-nine countries. The intention was to proclaim France’s dominant prowess in high culture (see Ratcliffe 2008: 21–6). Not to be outdone by the British in the arena of technological progress, the exhibition also featured a ‘Palace of industry’, which, like London and New York, demonstrated humanity’s increasing ability to harness nature.

In a few short years, then, the stage had been set. For the remaining decades of the nineteenth century, France and America would be the two countries that most enthusiastically embraced the exhibition culture. In Britain, the near ‘sacred’ regard in which the Crystal Palace was held cast a real shadow over subsequent events, with international exhibitions in 1862 and the early 1870s never attaining the same level of enthusiasm or praise. Nonetheless, by the mid 1880s, the number of cities participating accelerated rapidly, with Sydney, Melbourne, Atlanta, Amsterdam, Boston, Calcutta, New Orleans, Barcelona and Glasgow among those holding large-scale exhibitions in the ten-year period of 1879–88. Crucially, these events took place at a time when, according to Said (1993), European imperialism was flourishing and becoming fully established. For those exhibitions held in Europe, although displays of colonial ‘possessions’ had been one of the genres defining features from 1851 onwards, the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1878 was a watershed in
self-aggrandizement and pomp. The introduction of a ‘Rue des Nations’ heralded a shift away from collections of objects towards displays of national cultures (see Figure 2.1). The innovative use of architecture, most notably in the form of themed entrances, marked the ‘beginning of the genre whereby imperial sections were presented as exotic cities of pavilions and palaces’ (Greenhalgh 1988/2000: 65). For the London Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, organizers went to great lengths to show off the jewel of the British Empire, India, carefully – albeit somewhat creatively – reproducing the monuments, palaces and markets of the subcontinent.² As we shall see in Chapter 9, in both Europe and the United States, these exhibitions served as valuable resources for advancing the ideologies of empire and nation-building at home. Pivotal in this process was the depiction of populations and cultures under rule as inferior, amodern, stagnant and in need of civil guidance (see Greenhalgh 1988/2000). To communicate such ideas and values, displays deployed a regime of aesthetics whereby the ‘other’ was framed as exotic, erotic, primitive or, in some cases, savage. Intriguingly, these ideas were most tangibly expressed through the ‘Rue de Caire’, an architectural ensemble that would repeatedly appear in fairs across Europe and the United States throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Figure 2.2). In the core–periphery relations of empire, the juxtaposition between an industrialized, socially sophisticated Métropole and the premodern primitive was much more than merely a representation of cultural hierarchy. The presentation of India, Egypt, Algeria, Kenya and so forth as pre-industrial cultures played a role in legitimising the trade relations of empire. Displays of coffee, tea, oils, tobacco, textiles and art communicated the idea that

Figure 2.1 ‘Rue des Nations’, Paris, 1878
Source: © The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (91.R.11)
producers and consumers were part of a larger collective – that of a single integrated market. In this respect, fairs were a display of an ideology made manifest in notions of the ‘commonwealth’, whereby the liberalisation of national markets led to the transformation of resources into commodities. In their ordering of things and peoples, fairs thus played a distinct role in normalising the core–periphery cultural economies of a late-nineteenth-century
capitalist world system. Drawing on Heidegger, Hoffenberg summarizes this process accordingly:

By calling upon the authority of vision, exhibition officials expressed the idea of empire as a picture as well as a picture of empire. Exhibition organizers constructed a particular vision of the world or empire and its various social and material parts as a picture.

(2001: 73)

Inherent in this projection of empire was an imagining of the domestic nation. Deeply entrenched beliefs in Western societies that tied ideas of social betterment and progress to advances in technology provided the industrial revolution with a distinct moral and political impetus. In the competitive arena of late-nineteenth-century Europe, many also believed national strength and supremacy could be attained through the conquering of nature and the material world. Ephemeral exhibitions proved to be valuable devices for conveying such ideas to the public. The deployment of increasingly elaborate machines as the signifiers of industrialized technological modernity was an unfolding process.

Greenhalgh looks back to with a critical eye:

Universal advance of civilisation via the achievement of science was both a canon and an assumption at exhibitions. Thus it was reasoned, the bigger and more technologically determined exhibitions were, the more progress was being made. . . . As cultural manifestations they revealed an expansive West in its most flamboyant and bombastic state; baroque, overblown expressions of societies that felt they ruled the material world absolutely.


Rydel (1987, 1993, 2004) and Miller (2008) track similar processes in the United States for the decades spanning the turn of the twentieth century. Together they suggest numerous fairs offered a narrative of national unity based around ideas of technological progress and racial hierarchy. Indeed, fairs such as the World’s Columbian Exhibition held in Chicago 1893 and the Omaha Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898 would be remembered in part for the ‘scientific racism’ they imparted. Rydel has also suggested that, in permanently shaping American public culture, fairs left ‘an enduring vision of empire’ (1987: 237, 1993).³

For the public

In the various accounts cited above, much of the attention is given to the way exhibitions advanced the nationalist visions and propaganda of the upper classes and elites. Writers such as Bennett (1994), Hoffenberg (2001) and Roche (2000) have pursued a somewhat different route for understanding the state and exhibition by looking at the creation of public cultures and hegemony
as a participatory process. Looking specifically at 1851’s Great Exhibition, Bennett moves between Foucauldian and Gramscian understandings of power to argue the event needs to be seen as an important mechanism in the creation of a Victorian public culture. For Bennett, museums and fairs emerged in the nineteenth century as an ‘exhibitionary complex’ within which working- and middle-class publics could be brought together around particular aesthetic and pedagogic relations. These new cultural institutions, facilitating the collective inspection of objects coded by new knowledge forms such as anthropology and archaeology, represented important instruments of moral and cultural regulation such that popular support was, in effect, enlisted to advance ‘the values and objectives enshrined in the state’ (Bennett 1994: 151). Roche is highly sympathetic to Bennett’s emphasis on audience participation, indeed suggesting we regard expositions more as a ‘performative complex’. By way of explanation, he points to the oft-repeated strategy of exhibition organizers in Europe and North America of presenting African, Asian and Native Indian tribespeople in reconstructed ‘villages’. He suggests that ‘performance represented the idea that “this is how they live”, “this is what they do”; it did not merely present the fact that “this is what they are”’ (Roche 2000: 40). Roche thus argues that the participation of audiences in such acts helped create a public culture rooted in shared ideas of an ‘imagined community’ of mankind made up of hierarchically positioned nations and subjects.

For Hoffenberg though, in a lot of accounts of empires on display, agency and complicity in the production of colonial culture are too narrowly conceived (see Hoffenberg 2001). In an intriguing account of exhibitions held in England, India and Australia up until the outbreak of World War I, Hoffenberg illustrates how a geographically diverse and mobile network of scholars and bureaucrats drawn from across the British Empire contributed to the design and conceptualisation of displays. In effect, this new class of cultural expert ‘authored the categories of knowledge, forms of social identity, visual images, and commodities by which the ideologies of imperialism and nationalism were articulated’ (2001: 32). However, it is the importance of the latter that he wishes to stress, and how the production and consumption of exhibitions helped foster cultural nationalisms and citizenries in colonial nations. The appropriation of displays around 1900 by Australian organizers to promote federation – the process by which six British, self-governing colonies formed one nation – is among the various examples he cites.

As the nineteenth century came to a close, world’s fairs increasingly embraced the performative through the introduction of pageants, parades, stage shows and other events of ‘spectacle’. Given the orientalist and racist undertones of fairs at this time, such spectacle often took on the bizarre. In San Francisco 1894, for example, organizers asked the Japanese delegation to pull visitors around the fair in jinrikshas (rickshaws). With the Japanese angrily refusing to perform such a degrading, menial task, their place was taken by willing Germans, with painted faces and dressed up in ‘oriental’ costumes (see Chandler and Nathan 2008: 127–31). Some years later, the 1911 Festival
of Empire included ‘the Pageant of London’, a vast outdoor theatrical spectacle tracing the history of England through the story of London as an imperial city. The amphitheatre seated 8,000, and the pageant involved the recruitment of 15,000 volunteers. Critical here was the emergence of new communication and transport technologies at this time, with radio, film, cars, print media and rail all having an impact on the popular culture and social structures of many countries around the world in the lead up to World War I. World’s fairs, together with the Olympics and official ceremonies, were vital constituents of a new public culture oriented around media-covered, mass events. The display of ‘exotic’ cultures and distant countries at this time also played an important role in the early development of international tourism and the formation of a mass leisure culture based around travel. Although this new era of mass mobility and communication was widely heralded as progress, large-scale participatory events were also being appropriated as the grand ‘theatres’ of propaganda against a backdrop of increasingly aggressive nationalisms. In Europe in particular, expos would come to be embroiled in the ideological struggles that defined the continent at this time.

In the interwar period, Britain, Belgium and France all held major imperial expos. Belgium, an enthusiastic proponent of the genre (holding events in Antwerp, in 1894, Brussels, in 1897 and 1910, and Liège, in 1905), showcased its African territories in an exhibition co-hosted by Antwerp and Liège in 1930. Over in Britain, the newly opened Empire Stadium provided the arena for the most ambitious and ceremonially elaborate world’s fair since 1886, the British Empire Display Exhibition of 1924–5. The closing words of George V’s speech, ‘I declare this exhibition open’, were the first ever words by a head of state to be broadcast live on radio. Seven years later, the idea of a ‘greater France’, with her all dominions and territories, reached its zenith in the Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris. But, at a time when these countries were forging national identities around possessions in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, large-scale public events and gatherings in Germany and Russia were becoming the ‘rallies’ of fascism and totalitarianism. After many years of planning, the BIE was formed in Paris in 1928, as there was a growing unease about the directions in which expos were heading, as well as concerns about their organisation and scheduling (see González Lescartes 2008: 411–3). The thirty-one-country signatory Convention Relating to International Exhibitions, which came into effect at the same time, laid out a future of expos as forums for public education and international dialogue. Accordingly, Article 1 of the convention opened with:

An exhibition is a display which, whatever its title, has as its principal purpose the education of the public: it may exhibit the means at man’s disposal for meeting the needs of civilisation, or demonstrate the progress achieved in one or more branches of human endeavour, or show prospects for the future.

(Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) 1988: Part 1, Article 1)
Despite such developments, visitors to the 1937 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris could not fail to miss the hostilities on show in the gathering storm of World War II. Straddling the Champs de Mars, in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany faced off against each other with classically styled, monumental pavilions. Surmounting the German structure was a giant stone eagle, with its head disdainfully turned to one side and its talons grasping a wreath and swastika. Its future wartime adversary stood opposite, with huge statues of a Russian workingman and a peasant woman grasping hammer and sickle in a triumphant pose. It was a scene of symbolic confrontation that has few parallels in the history of architecture. Officially, the philosophy of the six-month-long expo was ‘Peace and progress’, but, as Chandler eloquently summarizes, such sentiments could do little to counter the prevailing tide of war:

The ritual of Peace and Progress was over. The medals were distributed, and the conquering exhibits of 44 nations politely applauded each other during the closing ceremonies on November 2, 1937. Soon the participants departed for their fortified cities and prepared to arm human pride with the tools of technology for the forthcoming tournament of blood. In the City of Light, the lamps were extinguished. The ultimate confrontation was at hand.

(Chandler 2008: 290)

**Thinking space**

It would be 1958 before another major world’s fair was held. The Brussels Universal and International Exposition was ostensibly organized to strengthen Belgium’s post-war economy and the dwindling domestic support for its African territories. Once again, the geopolitics of the moment intervened, this time with the Soviet Union facing off against its new cold-war enemy, the United States. Both superpowers seized the opportunity to propagate their respective ideological views of the world. In this regard, we can see a strong continuity between this event and the world’s fairs of the pre-war era. In both eras, the nation, sovereign or not, was the key axis around which displays of culture and technology were oriented. But the 42 million or so visitors who toured Brussels in 1958 were also asked to consider the realities of a new era that was unfolding on a vastly smaller scale, that of the atom. To this end, the event’s centrepiece was the 335-foot-high ‘Atomium’ structure: 165 billion times the size of an iron crystal, the Atomium featured nine 60-foot aluminium spheres to which visitors could travel via a combination of escalators and elevators housed in giant tubes. This inspired design endeavoured, after the devastating attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to reclaim atomic science as peaceful. The structure brilliantly captured a moment defined by the dual feelings of, on the one hand, a deep anxiety about a cold-war nuclear conflict and, on the other, the promise of limitless energy from the splitting of an atom’s
nucleus. Across the site, with submolecular science providing a thematic anchor, several countries featured displays of nuclear reactors and their plans for future energy development.

Remarkable as it is to look back now, visitors to Brussels 1958 were also presented with another form of spatial abstraction: the universe. The Soviet Union, for example, eager to counter Western portrayals of a technologically inferior superpower, displayed its Sputnik satellite display. However, it was the propaganda of Seattle 1962 and New York 1964 that really exposed fairgoers to the ambitions and rivalries of a cold-war space race. Entitled ‘Man’s life in the space age’, Seattle reflected the widespread preoccupation with space, particularly in America. Pavilion displays of ‘The world of tomorrow’ and ‘Spacearium’ responded to and fuelled the public’s excitement about a technological future that was about to unfold. Five years on, ‘Destination Moon’, an exhibit showcasing the US Apollo programme, was one of the most popular at Expo ’67, Montreal. In Osaka 1970, the same theme continued, with the US displaying the ‘Moon stone’, brought back by Apollo 11 just eight months before the expo opened, and the actual Apollo 8, the first manned spacecraft to circumnavigate the moon. Not to be outdone by its cold-war enemy, the Soviet Union built the expo’s largest pavilion, with exhibitions stretching across a staggering 270,000 square feet of floor space. Many of these focused on space and space technology (see Anderson, quoted in Findling and Pelle 2008: 345–50).

Throughout the history of world’s fairs, the theme selected for a specific event often tells us much about the prevailing concerns, anxieties and aspirations of the time. As we have seen, during an era of empire, the terms ‘imperial’ and ‘colonial’ appeared in the title of many exhibitions held around the world. Although this continued in the decades leading up to World War II, increasing anxieties about the legitimacy of empire meant a number of fairs at that time reverted to the fine arts and technology as specific points of focus. Notwithstanding this loss in confidence, events in Paris, Chicago, New York and elsewhere all continued to invoke notions of ‘progress’, ‘modern life’ or ‘tomorrow’, held as they were at the height of modernism. For those fairs held after the immense trauma of World War II, however, the emphasis not surprisingly shifted towards notions of humanity and the planetary. This would be reflected in the visual culture and architecture of expos, with the globe featuring prominently in promotional posters and in the sculptures and artwork installed across expo sites. Brussels 1958 led the way with its theme, ‘Building the world on a human scale’. New York followed six years later with ‘Man’s achievement on a shrinking globe in an expanding universe’, as did Montreal with ‘Man and his world’ and Osaka with ‘Progress and harmony for mankind’. Together, these reflected wider anxieties about global conflict, past and present, fears that were heightened greatly by the arrival of the nuclear age.

As Van Dyk (2007) notes, after 1970, fairs became less expansive, international and ambitious in their scope (Garn 2007: 216–19). Despite this, underlying shifts in emphasis are still discernible. The geographical scope of
various expos has remained at the planetary level, but the ways in which that human–non-human relationship is presented has changed profoundly. Gone is the confidence of conquering nature (at both the macro and micro scales); instead, visitors have been asked to consider their environment in terms of care, caution and respect. Coming back down from issues of space and the universe, Vancouver 1986 identified a ‘World in motion, world in touch’. By 1998, however, the need for more careful custodianship of that world was addressed in Lisbon in the form of ‘Oceans: a heritage for the future’, with this environmental trend continuing in Hanover in 2000 with ‘Humankind – nature – technology, a new world arising’ and again in Aichi, 2005, with ‘Nature’s wisdom’.

In Shanghai, environmental concerns were present once again, but on this occasion it would be at the scale of the city. Timeliness came from the widespread belief that we have recently entered a new era, whereby more than 50 per cent of the global population now resides in cities. But, in focusing on the city, Shanghai also resonated with issues addressed in a number of earlier expos. For example, in an America recovering from the Great Depression, automobile manufacturers saw the Chicago 1933–4 expo as an opportunity to reinvigorate the national automobile sector. The motor companies of Chrysler, Nash, De Soto and Studebaker all built pavilions to showcase their products, with both cars and architecture evoking progress through the design philosophy of streamlining (see Garn 2007: 29–49). The fair also showcased recent upgrades to Chicago’s infrastructure, with electric trams and trolley buses providing efficient and cheap public transport to the event. In New York, five years later, companies such as Ford, General Motors and Chrysler went further still, as their pavilions foregrounded the car within grand visions of hyper-connected cities. In the General Motors building, the ‘Futurama’ exhibit offered the concept of an infinite network of superhighways and sprawling suburbs: the American city of 1960. The Ford pavilion featured ‘The road of tomorrow’, a monumental spiralling ramp with cars circling up and down. The centrepiece of the event was the 700-foot–tall Trylon structure and its accompanying spherical Perisphere. Inside, visitors looked down on an enormous diorama called ‘Democracy’, which featured a high-rise commercial core, green spaces and elevated highways. Intriguingly, in New York 1964, urban automobile culture formed part of the narrative of space exploration seen earlier, as General Motors displayed lunar-exploration buggies. And, in a reversal of influences, the concept cars of America’s future, such as the Firebird IV, took their design aesthetic from the mould of rocket technology. In Montreal’s Expo ’67, portrayals of urban development shifted towards housing, most notably through the construction of an experimental apartment complex called ‘Habitat ’67’. The intention was to build a 1,000-unit community, incorporating schools and shops in a highly distinctive, seemingly haphazard design, although only 158 of the prefabricated apartments were built in time for the fair. An experimental concept in urban living that was never completed, it would be decades before Habitat ’67 became one of the city’s most chic and sought-after addresses.
Although Montreal stands out as an example of a mega-event that had a lasting impact on its surroundings, the legacy of world’s fairs has long been integral to their planning. In Paris in 1900, the expo successfully transformed large areas of urban space between the Champs Elysées and the Seine. The first line of the city’s Métro underground, Porte Maillot–Porte de Vincennes, was also opened on 19 July, in time for the event. More recently, however (and as with the Olympics), the idea of regenerating specific, under-utilized areas of a city has become increasingly pivotal to the planning and conceptualization of expos. In the case of Seville 1992, for example, rather than investing heavily in pavilions as grandiose architectural statements, planners directed resources towards the construction of six bridges, with the most spectacular resembling a harp, with cables attached to a concrete pylon. The event was also the catalyst for the construction of a new airport and railway station, as well as numerous highways and a high-speed line connecting the city, fair site and Madrid. In short, the upgrading of urban infrastructures has been the legacy of world’s fairs for a number of cities.

**Progress**

Although the themes of world’s fairs and expos have evolved and shifted over the decades, one idea has remained constant: that of progress. As we have seen, from the Great Exhibition of 1851 onwards, it is an idea repeatedly evidenced in the latest scientific and technological developments. In 1901, US President William McKinley regarded fairs as ‘the time-keepers of progress . . . they record the world’s achievements’ (quoted in Van Dyk 2007: 216). In addition to displaying the latest advances in industrial machinery, expos of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the ideal platform for manufacturers to showcase consumer products and to create imaginary futures in which such technologies were the centre of more comfortable, efficient and hygienic lives. In Philadelphia 1876, the sewing machine, telephone and typewriter were among the novelties on display. Contemporaneously, in Europe, the ice machine and electric lighting were exhibited to the Parisian public. The theme of cooling continued, with the ice cream cone and iced tea featuring at St Louis in 1904, and with domestic air conditioning, which constituted part of New York’s ‘World of tomorrow’ in 1939 (see Mattie 1998; Ackermann 2002). Closely associated with the new paradigm of cool living were prototypes of the clothes of the future. In its coverage of the 1939 fair, *Vogue* magazine reported on Walter Teague’s dress designs made from cellophane and an opaque ‘Teca’ fabric: ‘Teague forecasts near nudity. What with universal air conditioning and better bodies, clothes will be reduced to a minimum’ (1 February 1939, quoted in Garn 2007: 66–7).

Together, these exhibits formed part of exhibitionary culture that had become technologically determinist in its illusory constructions of the future. In America, the Smithsonian Institution had contributed heavily to content provision in world’s fairs up until the 1930s, but, as the institution’s influence
waned, organizers looked to the National Research Council (NRC) for support. Established in 1916, the NRC was primarily concerned with advancing scientific research for national defense. Rydell (1993) traces the instrumental role the NRC played in formulating a philosophy for the Chicago 1933–4 fair. In the final stages of planning, it was agreed that, to celebrate ‘A century of progress’, there should be a ‘Temple of pure science’ at the centre, with surrounding exhibits devoted to applied and social sciences. Commenting on how the supremacy of science manifests itself physically, Rydell notes:

Scientific idealism found aesthetic expression in the murals placed in the science building and in the architecture of the building itself, though [they] were concerned not with aesthetics per se but with subordinating art and architecture to the social implications of the philosophy crafted.

( Ibid.: 97)

This philosophy was carried through to the event’s official guidebook, which declared ‘Science finds – industry applies – man conforms’ (Ibid.: 98–9). Across the site, exhibits were designed to convince visitors that science and scientists were the gatekeepers to societal progress. Social-science displays promised solutions to the challenges of industrial and urban life. Rydell indicates how an ‘Indian village’ was constructed on site, incorporating a Mayan temple replica and groups of Native Americans. A publicity release explained the intended effect of deliberately positioning this village in between the automobile exhibits and the concession avenue:

The General Motors tower rises, a bright orange tribute to Modernism, over the wigwams and tepees and hogans of the oldest Americans, over the dances and feathers and beads in the Indian stadium . . . ‘What a distance we have come,’ is the theme of the World’s Fair, but nowhere does it come home so sharply to the visitor as when he attends the Indian ceremonials.

(Quoted in Rydell 1993: 104)

Clearly, in this linking of technology with racially infused moralities of progress, we see strong continuities with the exos of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, as discussed earlier. Throughout, assertions were made that tied modernity to the universalisms of science and rationality and, by implication, associated the traditional and premodern with the particular. As authors such as Wallerstein (2006) have demonstrated, such geographically and culturally construed meta-narratives of supremacy were an integral feature of capitalism under the conditions of colonialism. To advance, dominant capitalist societies constructed a ‘cultural–intellectual scaffolding [comprised of] a paradoxical combination of universalistic norms and racist–sexist practices’ (2006: 54) – a set of relationships rendered visible in the expo genre.
In the American fairs of the early twentieth century, we also see the growing influence of the corporate sector. Technology alone was no longer the signifier of futurity and progress. Instead, such ideas were increasingly conveyed through particular brands, including Coca-Cola, Du Pont, General Electric, Goodyear and Kodak, as well as the various car manufacturers noted above. With corporations becoming a permanent feature of world’s fairs, it is of particular interest to find that many of these American brands have loyaly exhibited all over the world, aligning and realigning themselves to the hopes and aspirations of the moment. Accordingly, in response to the new consumer economies of China, Coca-Cola and General Motors built elaborate pavilions in Shanghai, entitled ‘The happiness factory’ and ‘Take a drive to 2030’, respectively.

The concept of pavilions as a seemingly enduring novelty of world’s fairs has ensured architecture has remained one of the genre’s key markers of modernity and futurity. Returning to the Crystal Palace of 1851, it was noted above that the construction of large exhibition spaces at that time was only made possible through the materials and techniques offered by industrial engineering. Interestingly, it was innovation that relied heavily on tradition for its form. Up until the late 1870s, exhibition spaces – as the new ‘temples’ of modernity and progress – reproduced the design of the classical basilica: an elongated architecture based around naves, free-standing columns and, in many instances, a dome. Fusion between classicism and progressive modernism would be a characteristic of numerous fairs in the lead up to the twentieth century. At times, one would clearly prevail over the other. The Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893 thoroughly embraced classicism, with richly decorated buildings and public squares drawing directly from the orders of Greco-Roman architecture. As Mattie (1998) notes, the fair was a self-enclosed world looking in the opposite direction to the mushrooming skyscrapers of the Chicago skyline. Plaster-covered buildings featured heavily again in Paris 1900, this time in the neoclassical style of the Beaux Arts. Structures built for the previous expo of 1889 were given a makeover, with highly elaborate facades incorporating various historical styles in a rich pastiche. A facelift planned for the Eiffel Tower was abandoned.

In the aftermath of World War I, it would be some years before architects were able to express the confidence of Modernism and create a distinctive style for the time. Architects such as Le Corbusier were at the forefront in renouncing the formal vocabulary of classicism. For the 1925 Paris expo, he designed the ‘Pavillon de l’esprit nouveau’. Built from reinforced concrete, the structure featured roof terraces, ribbon windows and an open-plan interior: a concept he famously described as a ‘machine à habiter’ (machine for living). The arrival of Modernism in the United States also meant historical revival was displaced by a belief that form followed function, such that clean lines and bold facades replaced ornamentation and filigree. Coming one year after the influential International Exhibition of Modern Architecture held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 1932, the Chicago expo showcased a wide range
of modern architecture, with both domestic and international exhibitors all
drawing on a vocabulary of cubes, octagons, slender concrete towers, and steel
and glass facades. But, at a time when American architects were looking to
reclaim a fragile confidence for the country after the Great Depression, their
European counterparts were operating in a milieu of rambunctious nation-
alisms, as we saw earlier. This involved a return to monumental classicism in
Paris 1937, with the Soviet Union and Germany being among those expressing
power and unyielding strength through architecture.

Years later, the fairs of Brussels, Seattle and others heralded a return to the
avant-garde, with more radical, experimental designs in favour. In addition
to the Atomium, Brussels featured several highly experimental buildings,
most notably Le Corbusier’s ‘hyperbolic-paraboloid’ pavilion for the Philips
Company (for further details, see Mattie 1998: 202–9). Nine years later,
Montreal’s Habitat ’67 housing complex was one of a number of radical
initiatives that called for a rethink about the ways in which cities should be
planned and managed. But, if we look back over more recent international
expositions, perhaps the last truly iconic building designed for such an event
was the 600-foot-tall Space Needle in Seattle, completed in time for the 1962
fair. With world’s fairs downsizing in their ambition and scale from the 1970s
onwards, architecture has similarly become more restrained and less flam-
boyant. It would be a mistake, however, to regard this as a severing of ties
between the built environment and notions of progress. The buildings of expos
have continued to point to the future, proclaiming progress in various ways.
Not surprisingly, since the 1990s, environmental concerns have fostered
designs that incorporate and respond to the natural world. As a number of the
following chapters reveal, the environment, with all its associated narratives
of ‘sustainability’, ‘eco-friendly’ and so forth, is a trend that has been well
and truly carried through to the architecture of Shanghai 2010.

**China on display**

Much of the international press coverage of Shanghai 2010 somewhat
misleadingly stated that this was the first world’s fair to be held in a developing
country and was an inaugural hosting for China. As Michael Godley indicated
back in 1978, the international fair held in Nanking in 1910 has become
‘a forgotten event’. Opening its doors on 5 June, the Nanking South Seas
Exhibition attracted fourteen nations, seventy-eight private companies and the
participation of fifteen Chinese provinces, each of which erected pavilions
(Pelle 2008). Emulation of world’s fairs elsewhere extended to both exhibit
themes and modes of display. Modernity and technology once again took centre
stage, here via displays of telephones, modern armaments, machinery and much
else. Private exhibitors offered demonstrations ranging from mining to
construction technologies, and from tea harvesting equipment to agricultural
fertilizers (Godley 1978: 521). Godley’s detailed account of Nanking includes
descriptions of architecture familiar to other world’s fairs held around that time.
The site stretched over a 100-acre area, with visitors greeted by an elaborate
gateway in the style of a palace. Once inside, they gazed along a grand boulevard, with a Western-style hotel, railway station and modern bank among the buildings straddling the walkway. Nearby pavilions dedicated to Industry, Education and the Fine Arts all took their inspiration from Western architecture (ibid.: 505). The large ‘Hall of agriculture’, for example, combined a Chinese interior with a classical Western facade that featured porticos and columns. A grand bazaar sold goods from all over the world, and Chinese provincial exhibits showcased regional handicrafts and arts.

Segregating domestic displays by province proved to be an important factor in shaping the event’s overall significance. The sense of competition it created, and the rivalry between the mandarins involved, not only helped promote the event, but also fed into the organizers’ desire for a spirit of nationalism (ibid.: 517). As Godley (1978: 511) notes, Chinese nationalism at that time was ‘a complex quality with a strong parochial element’. Provincial authorities had long been used to couching their own interests in wider imperial agendas. Participation, they were told, was an opportunity to show how their industries, schools and so forth helped advance national interests. This spirit of competition also provided an important platform for normalising economic entrepreneurship, particularly for an embryonic bourgeois class. The fair projected a future rich with technology, with motor races and an ‘aviation week’ featuring dirigibles drawing in the crowds. Reflecting upon the overall significance of the event, Godley suggests ‘the Nanking World’s Fair was a watershed dividing imperial from revolutionary China’ (ibid.: 504).

The hosting of Expo 2010 involved revisiting archives in Beijing, Shanghai and elsewhere where records of the country’s involvements in previous international exhibitions might be found. As it turned out, Nanking was far from being the country’s first encounter with world’s fairs. In fact, according to the archives of Shanghai Library, China exhibited traditional craft items and agricultural products in London 1851, winning gold and silver awards (Huang 2007: 17). Chinese silk, in particular, was noted for its quality. Although China participated again in Vienna 1873, it would be three years later before official delegates were sent to represent the country, with the first of those travelling to Philadelphia. The exhibit included a large wooden archway and a display covering 3,000 m². Once again, prizes were attained, with silk, tea, porcelain and wood carvings all being acknowledged for their quality (ibid.: 19). In its extensive archives of world’s fairs, the Getty Research Institute holds numerous sketches, engravings and photographs of the various Chinese pavilions built from the 1870s onwards. In 1878, for example, as Figure 2.3 illustrates, ‘Le Pavillon Chinois’ was designed around two galleries separated by a gated courtyard. This provided a showcase for Chinese carpentry and traditional wooden architectural techniques (see Figure 2.4). In 1900, China built reproductions of two elaborate, traditional wooden structures (see Figure 2.5). A mise-en-scène fusing rural and imperial China was created through the addition of rickshaws and imported Chinese men and women wearing conical hats and ‘traditional’ garments of clothing.
One of the key attractions for the 1904 world’s fair held in St Louis was a Chinese village. It was an ensemble that, in its aesthetic codification, placed China close to other ‘exotic’, ‘primitive’ peoples (such as Native Americans) on the continuum of traditional to modern society. As the caption to the portrait of the village for the event’s official souvenir publication, *The Greatest of Expositions Completely Illustrated*, indicated:

A great dragon that looks as if it might breathe fire and slay with perfect ease all who approach it guards the entrance to the Chinese village. At the present time, when both China and Japan are so much in the public eye, the Celestials are of exceptional interest to Americans. Nowhere can these strange people be seen in all their native environment better than in
Figure 2.4 ‘Les Chinois travaillant à leur installation’ from *L’Exposition de Paris 1878*

Source: © The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (90-S334)

Figure 2.5 ‘La Chine’

Source: © The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (T804.C1 P3 1900)
their village. Here they carry on their natural occupations exactly as if they were at home. Among the five hundred individuals who were brought over from China for the world’s fairs there are merchants, actors, magicians and representatives of all the trades. In addition to the booths of the merchants and toilers, there is a theatre in which the real Chinese drama is given by Chinese actors and actresses. The performance is so utterly unlike anything that is to be found in the Western hemisphere that no one should miss seeing it. There are also two restaurants where Chinese dishes, ranging in price from one to twenty dollar, may be had.

(Louisiana Purchase Exposition Co. 1904: 54)

Shortly after the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, the new government was eager to make its presence felt at the Panama World Expo (held in San Francisco in 1915), shipping thousands of items over for the event. Eleven years on, China and Japan would be among the largest exhibitors at Philadelphia, presenting visitors with elaborate displays of porcelain, silks, lacquerware, embroidered textiles, tea, precious stones and other cultural items. One of China’s most memorable contributions of this period was the reproduction of the Golden Pavilion of Jehol at the Century of Progress fair of 1931, Chicago. A reproduction of a summer residence, the elaborate, double-roofed structure was made from 28,000 pieces of hand-carved wood, all of which were held together without nails. Although such architectural showpieces represented a rich national heritage, China’s inability to compete with the modern and technological displays of the host and other Western countries was not easily accepted. As Huang Yaoheng (2007: 19) indicates: ‘through participation in the World Expo, the Chinese realized how backward their country was and how urgent it was to develop the trade and economy.’

Such aspirations would be lost, however, to the tumultuous decades that defined much of China’s twentieth century, and it would be the early 1980s before the country fully participated in world’s fairs again. At the Knoxville fair of 1982, the Chinese pavilion displayed a variety of solar-power technologies, as well as distinctive art works. In Brisbane, six years later, China responded to the theme of leisure by promoting itself as a tourist destination via an ‘Introduction to China’ film (ibid.: 20–1). Since then, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has remained a regular participant of world’s fairs, drawing on its cultural and rapidly advancing technological achievements to align itself with the themes and agendas of the day.

As we saw in Chapter 1 of this volume, China’s re-emergence on the international stage of World’s Fairs in the 1980s was not restricted merely to participation. Bureaucrats in Shanghai quickly understood how hosting such an event might act as an important catalyst for the economic and cultural reforms that were beginning to be declared a national priority at that time. To complement the brief historical overview of world’s fairs and international expos offered here, the following two chapters look more closely at these more recent domestic transitions. As Hilary Hongjin He and Cameron McAuliffe
illustrate, the organisation of Shanghai 2010 was dependent upon the profound political, economic and cultural shifts that, together, were defining and redefining China’s opening years of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 For an overview of the precursors to world’s fairs, see Findling and Pelle (2008) and Breckenridge (1989).
2 See Hoffenberg (2001: 145–64) for an excellent account of depictions of India over the course of a number of exhibitions.
3 Somewhat provocatively, Rydell (1987: 236) suggests we need to see that legacy in terms of empires, home and abroad. Accordingly, he states:

Their (the fairs’) anthropologically validated racial hierarchies served several purposes. They legitimised racial exploitation at home and the creation of an empire abroad. Carefully designed exhibits of non-whites left little doubt that the same set of ideas that have been used to justify the political and economic repression of Native Americans, Afro-Americans and Asian-Americans were being used to validate imperial policy overseas.

4 See Roche (2000), Chapter 3, for detailed discussion of the interconnections between expos, new media and communications technologies, and the rise of pre-World War I ‘supranationalisms’ in Europe.
5 Officially entitled the Coloniale, Maritime et d’Art Flamand.
6 The Empire Stadium, which opened in 1923, would be renamed Wembley Stadium in the 1950s.
7 Geppert (2008: 233) also notes that a cablegram was sent around the world at that same moment, arriving back in London 80 seconds later (see also Geppert 230–6).
8 For example, Chicago 1993–4 was entitled ‘A century of progress exposition’, the theme of Paris 1937 was ‘Peace and progress’, and New York 1939–40 was themed as ‘The world of tomorrow’.
9 These were among the displays of the Exposition Universelle held in Paris, 1878.