The Fair to End All Fairs

By CHARLES McGRATH APRIL 18, 2014 | NY Times

When you drive by on the Van Wyck Expressway or the Grand Central Parkway, the space-age towers of the New York State Pavilion, among the few remaining traces of the 1964 New York World's Fair, rise up from the trees like a relic of some vanished, Jetsonian civilization, and the people who built them seem much more than 50 years distant from us. They were people apparently inspired by the idea of progress, and by a now quaint-seeming faith in the future, who actually believed in things like world's fairs. Who would think of organizing such an event now? Who would pay for it? Who would bother to go?

The '64 fair was probably out of date the minute it opened. Robert Moses, who planned and ran the fair with his customary dictatorial firmness, had no notion of

the cultural changes beginning then to percolate in America. He insisted that Guy Lombardo would be a bigger draw than the Beatles. And in hindsight that fair, thought at the time to be a celebration of modernity, seems instead like the tail end of something, the petering out of what was essentially a 19th-century phenomenon.

Walt Disney clowned with "Stone Age" figures featured in an audio-animatronic exhibit in 1964. Credit Neal Boenzi/The New York Times

The greatest world's fair of all, the one that became a model for most that followed, was the London Exhibition of 1851, which featured the famous Crystal Palace, an immense iron and steel pavilion, and drew some seven million visitors, or roughly one-third the population of Britain at the time. Dickens, Tennyson, George Eliot and Karl Marx all went. Charlotte Brontë visited twice and wrote that the multitudes were so staggered by what they saw — steam engines and locomotives, factory machines, carriages and harness work, chests full of diamonds and pearls — that they were subdued into near-silence.

The exhibition was the brainchild of Prince Albert, who saw it as an emblem of Victorian might and confidence, and it was so successful and so widely envied that similar fairs started popping up every few years as other cities and countries vied to demonstrate their own importance. To list only a few: New York in 1853, a direct knockoff of London, with its own Crystal Palace erected in what is now Bryant Park; Philadelphia in 1876; Paris in 1889 (the Eiffel Tower was built for this one); Chicago in 1893; St. Louis in 1904.

Most followed a standard formula: grand, imposing architecture, even if it was impermanent (the famed "alabaster city" at the Chicago fair was largely built of plaster of Paris), and a rollout of the latest technology. The elevator, the Ferris wheel, the typewriter, the telephone — all made their debuts at world's fairs. So did

Cracker Jack, kudzu, the ice cream cone and, after a fashion, the Belgian waffle, which may be the most enduring legacy of the ’64 fair.

These 19th- and early-20th-century fairs paid lip service to some notion of world friendship, but at their core were civic and national self-advertisements, displays of financial might, government willpower and engineering prowess. To make a similar statement today, you would probably want, like China in 2008 and Russia just this winter, to stage a big, attention-getting Olympics instead. The message is pretty much the same, and so, for that matter, is the aftermath: a pile of debt and a bunch of architectural white elephants.

The fairs all displayed a touching faith in the power of technology to create a better tomorrow, perhaps none more so than the 1939 New York World’s Fair, which between the Great Depression and world war offered the promise of a sleek, air-conditioned, drudgery-free future.

Two big attractions at the ’64 fair were Disney’s audio-animatronic robots and color TV, both of which, come to think of it, helped put world’s fairs out of business. Disneyland and, later, Disney World, that is, became much more transfixing tourist attractions than any fair could hope to be, and television, by bringing news and entertainment into the living room, diminished people’s urge to get together in big crowds every few years to find out what was going on in the world.

If there were a market for it, someone could now probably create a virtual world’s fair, one that you could attend just by putting on a headset, and then every few weeks you could reboot it to get the latest software updates. New technology now intrudes upon us so fast that we can barely keep up, let alone spend a year or so in collective admiration, and with it comes not so much wonderment — the kind of awe that hushed Brontë’s 19th-century Londoners — as anxiety. The more new things come into our lives, the more aware we become of how quickly the old ones wear out, like the New York State Pavilion, moldering in the Long Island weeds.

In the summer of 1964 I was 16, and I went to the World’s Fair with some friends from my all-boys high school in Boston. Being 16, I was determined to be unimpressed, and I succeeded. A lot of the architecture was flimsy and cheesy, I decided. Or else, like the General Electric Pavilion and that silly U.S. Royal Ferris wheel in the shape of a tire, it all smacked too much of corporate hucksterism.

I no longer remember much of what I did and saw there. A half-century erodes a lot of brain cells. I ate a Belgian waffle, I know that. I stood in line forever at the Vatican Pavilion to get on a conveyor belt that slowly, boringly, inched past Michelangelo’s Pietà, sequestered behind a Plexiglas screen about a hundred yards away. I went to the Futurama exhibit at the General Motors Pavilion, where the world of tomorrow, I concluded, didn’t look a whole lot different from New York City in 1964.

That was my real discovery that summer: New York City itself. To my provincial eyes, the city, and Times Square especially, seemed a more colorful and exciting fair than anything out in Flushing, and I didn't see the point of going all the way out to Queens when everything you could want was right there in Midtown. The Chrysler Building and the Empire State seemed more genuinely daring and modern than the fair's many predictable flying-saucer-shaped domes, and the people on the street, of a polyglot variety we never experienced back in clannish, segregated Boston, seemed like true world citizens, not just gaping tourists.

My own touristy goals then were pretty modest: I wanted to meet girls and drink unlimited amounts of alcohol. I failed at both, though I'm pretty sure it was on this trip that I got to eat Chinese food for the first time. The glamour and promise of the city remained for me undiminished, worth the whole trip, and I made a promise to myself to return someday. Surely this was what the future really looked like.

This week's AoW directions are a bit different than usual so pay close attention.

1. The AoW is due on Thursday this week, not Friday. Don't blow it!
2. Annotate the article with an eye toward the following:
    a. What is the author's argument? What was the purpose of the World's Fairs throughout history?
    b. To what modern event does the author compare the extravagance of the fairs?
    c. What is a white elephant? Think of at least one example of a white elephant from your own experience. This is one of those great moments to ask your parents for help. Avoid Wikipedia and the Interwebs. I want a **real** example.
    d. Define all of the allusions including: the Jetsons, Charlotte Bronte, kudzu, and so on.
    e. What do you think about the author inserting himself into the story? Effective? Annoying? Something else?
    f. The author implies that ushering in the future simultaneously requires and ushering out of the past? Is this true? What does the article imply about the future and the past?
3. Create a thorough SOAPSTone analysis.
4. Find all of the following:
    a. Three phrases or sentences that delight you. Highlight and explain.
    b. One sentence that has a pleasing and effective structure. Highlight and explain.