

Networks of Power: The New York World's Fair of 1964-1965

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In 1959, a group of Manhattan businessmen conceived the idea of having a second world's fair in New York City. Although the World's Fair of 1939-1940 in New York had not been a financial success, these men remembered it fondly as an international event that had brought their city recognition and had opened up a window to the future. To lead the corporation that would run the 1964-1965 fair, they chose Robert Moses, who was one of the most powerful men in New York State, let alone New York City, and was used to getting his way. At the time Moses held numerous posts: Park Commissioner and Construction Coordinator of New York City, head of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, and Chair of the State Power Authority, the Long Island State Park Commission, and the State Council of Parks. Moses accepted the job, despite having to give up his city positions, because he saw his involvement with the fair as a

way to realize a long-held dream: to make the site of the world's fair a great park to rival Central Park.

At its opening on April 22, 1964, the New York World's Fair was already one of the most ambitious fairs ever to be held. Covering 646 acres, the fair included eighty countries, twenty-four states, and fifty corporations represented in a variety of pavilions. By its end on October 17, 1965, over 51 million people had visited, the highest attendance for a world's fair up to that time. Despite these numbers, most critics then and now considered the fair a failure, particularly when compared to the earlier New York World's Fair. The 1964-1965 fair has been forgotten as world's fairs themselves have fallen out of favor since the mid-twentieth century. Yet, fairs during the early postwar era were major events; if one looks beyond a superficial comparison to prewar fairs, this postwar fair was successful in that it prefigured the future, politically, economically, and culturally.

Much of the criticism of the fair was directed at Moses. His influence in the city, region, and state over the decades had brought him much negative attention by the 1950s and 1960s, when a growing number of people saw his near-absolute power as having a deleterious effect on urban planning. In an effort to ensure that the fair would be profitable, Moses prohibited the Fair Corporation from building many pavilions itself. Instead, nations, states, corporations, and other organizations rented land from the Fair Corporation and designed and erected their own buildings and exhibits. The result was what detractors decried as a cacophony of architectural styles and forms, mixing modernism and popular culture, rather than the unified style that many critics expected of a world's fair. In addition, Moses, who needed a two-year fair in order to turn a profit,

did not win approval from the Bureau of International Expositions, which required fairs to run for only one year, so that a number of member nations, many in western Europe, refused to participate. Another shortcoming was the inability to enlist the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc as exhibitors because of Cold War animosities that came to a head in the early 1960s. In the end, the fair lost money, like its predecessor, and Moses was unable to carry out his vision for transforming Flushing Meadows into a great urban park. Many writers, including Robert Caro in *The Power Broker* (1974) and Ada Louise Huxtable, an architecture critic for *The New York Times*, have pointed out these failures, but in doing so they neglected to acknowledge some of the remarkable aspects of the fair.

The 1964-1965 fair embodied many of the changes occurring in the post-World War II period. Politically, the fair represented the United States's increasing power in its relationship with Europe; decolonization, particularly in Africa and Asia; and the Cold War. The absence of most western European nations at the fair foreshadowed the increasing dominance of the United States as a political, economic, and cultural power in the late twentieth century. Though Moses failed to enlist these nations, he successfully attracted many newly independent countries, including India, Pakistan, Morocco, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Malaysia, and the Philippines. In turn, these nations, some of them only a few years old, saw the fair as an opportunity to present themselves to the world. Furthermore, the Cold War loomed over Flushing Meadows. The absence of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc gave the United States government and American corporations an unfettered opportunity to present American capitalism, technology, and culture in what they believed was the most positive light. Economically, the fair reflected what we can see in retrospect as the global supremacy of capitalism in the late twentieth

century. Moses skillfully brought in many corporations, such as General Motors, General Electric, and IBM, whose pavilions dominated the fair in size and scale, leading critics to complain that Moses had given the fair over to unabashed capitalism.

Culturally, the fair embodied profound religious changes as evangelical Protestantism brought new missionary fervor to developing countries, seen in the preponderance of religious pavilions, such as those for the Vatican, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; the Church of Christ, Scientist; the evangelist Billy Graham; the Wycliffe Bible Translators 2,000 Tribes; and Sermons from Science. The fair also displayed the continued acceptance and dependence on the automobile and the highway, leading to greater suburbanization in the industrialized world and especially in the United States. The architecture and the plan of the fairgrounds reaffirmed the shift to a suburbanized, anti-urban model already underway and served as an important piece of propaganda to support the ongoing construction of the interstate highway system and Americans' ever-increasing reliance on cars.

Buildings throughout the fair employed a popular version of mid-century modernism, characterized by glass and steel, and spare, unornamented facades. This style had become associated with corporate capitalism in the postwar era. For corporate pavilions, such as the one Eero Saarinen designed for IBM, this style of modern architecture combined whimsy with the power of technology and the free-market system. Saarinen shaped the IBM Pavilion into an ovoid that resembled an IBM Selectric typewriter ball, which served as an advertisement for one of the company's best-known products of the time. The scale of the building and its technological gimmicks, such as the "people wall," which carried seated visitors up into the ball, balanced fantasy with

more serious and awe-inspiring claims about IBM's innovations in the 1960s. For foreign pavilions, especially those of developing nations, this combination of populism and modernism was more complex. In keeping with the fair's overall futuristic appearance, the designs of these structures used popular versions of modernism integrated with regional and traditional elements to identify a particular nation with its unique heritage and distinguish it from the other countries exhibiting at the fair. Nations such as Sudan, Sierra Leone, Malaysia, and Indonesia wanted to appear both modern and traditional, as places worthy of foreign investment through industrial development and tourism, but also as places of ancient civilization. Thus, the Pavilion of Sudan took the form of a modern reinforced-concrete mosque partly enclosed on the second floor by a teak lattice screen and crowned by a white onion dome, both common elements of Islamic architecture. The prevalence of modernism at the fair demonstrated the ambivalence toward breaking free from western modes of architecture and colonial hegemony, especially for new nations. The postwar modernism they incorporated in their pavilions reflected the dominance of the style after the war, its association with democracy and capitalism, and the desire of new nations to be players on a global stage. Even religious organizations adopted this modern style for their pavilions in order to appear dynamic and relevant to contemporary times, while still conveying a sense of timelessness and spirituality. For example, Edward Durrell Stone designed the Christian Science Pavilion as a dazzling white structure topped by a translucent skydome that bathed the interior with light. At a fair crowded with attractions, designers and their clients had to create eye-catching expressions of modernism to compete for visitors.

And the fair did attract visitors in huge numbers. Though total admissions fell short of the projected number of 70 million people, the fair's 51 million attendees helped pump millions of dollars into the New York metropolitan area's economy. Private and public investments in the fair, surrounding roadways, rail improvements, and other forms of related infrastructure amounted to over one billion dollars. New York state expenditures for the fair alone totaled 90 million dollars. In the 1960s a world's fair was a big deal, and the attention that public officials and corporate leaders paid to it reflects this attitude.

It is not a surprise, then, that as one of New York's most powerful and influential families, the Rockefellers had a number of connections with the 1964-1965 fair. Both David Rockefeller and John D. Rockefeller 3rd served on the fair's Board of Directors. In addition, the Chase Manhattan Bank, whose president was David, helped finance the fair through the sale of notes. Nelson A. Rockefeller, as governor of New York, signed legislation providing for state funding of highway construction and expansion around the fairgrounds in Flushing Meadows to enhance automobile transportation to the fair. Nelson also appointed the New York State Commission on the World's Fair, headed by Lieutenant Governor Malcolm Wilson, that oversaw the construction and exhibitions of the New York State Pavilion, designed by Philip Johnson Associates. Also in his capacity as governor, Nelson was instrumental in assuring state funds for this pavilion, as well as for the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center, whose first president was John D. Rockefeller 3rd (JDR 3rd). Philip Johnson Associates also designed this building, planned as a theater of the dance; it was completed in time for the fair's opening in April 1964. The New York State Theater was intended to function as the center of cultural

activities for the fair. Moses himself had been deeply involved in the early planning stages for Lincoln Center and was a critical figure in obtaining the land for that complex as co-chair of the New York City Committee on Slum Clearance with Mayor Robert Wagner. Because the Fair Corporation did not want to invest in building many of its own structures, coordinating performances and art exhibitions at sites and institutions around New York City was a way to make up for the lack of such entertainments at the fair. The Fair Corporation and the Lincoln Center Corporation worked together to create a cultural program in the performing arts during the period of the fair, though in the end, few performances directly related to the fair took place at Lincoln Center. Nevertheless, JDR 3rd saw this collaboration as a significant way to reflect the increased emphasis of New York state's government on cultural affairs under Nelson. Strengthening the network further, the Lincoln Center Corporation was one of the many holders of world's fair notes.

The Rockefellers had a less public role at the fair, however. For example, the exhibit at the Vatican pavilion benefitted from donations from the Archdiocese of New York and members of the Rockefeller family. So as not to favor one religion, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund made a grant to the Protestant Council of New York to help finance the planning of a Protestant pavilion, reasoning in a 1962 memo that "it seems desirable for Protestantism to do something to further the spiritual side of the Fair, and in part . . . because of the Vatican's major plans for the Fair, including now the Pieta." In addition, Moses had tried to enlist David in organizing and supporting a Temple of Religion focusing on the Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish faiths after the popular inter-faith pavilion at the New York World's Fair of 1939-1940. David, however, argued that

the plan to focus on only three religions was too limited in scope; ultimately, sufficient support did not materialize.

Another important link between the Rockefellers and the fair was the architect Wallace K. Harrison. The family architect for the Rockefellers, Harrison worked as head architect for the design and construction of Lincoln Center. He also had a long relationship with Moses and served as the chair of the fair's short-lived Board of Design, which included Edward Durrell Stone, Gordon Bunshaft, Henry Dreyfuss, and Othmar Ammann. Though Moses eliminated the board when it became clear that its members had a different vision of the fair than he (the board wanted the Fair Corporation to finance and erect a giant, donut-shaped pavilion to house all the fair's exhibits), Harrison and his partner, Max Abramovitz, ended up designing the Bell System Pavilion and the Hall of Science.

The fair's financial problems led to great strain on the personal and professional networks on which Moses had depended. When it became clear in late 1964 that the fair was running at a deficit and that Moses had been trying to hide this reality, supporters of the fair quickly fell away. For example, the Chase Manhattan Bank acted as an agent for noteholders to ensure that they would receive at least a fraction of their original investment at a time when Moses argued that any remaining revenues should go first to creating Flushing Meadows Park. In January 1965 David Rockefeller resigned from the Board of Directors. JDR 3rd resigned from the board in November 1965 because of a conflict of interest between the Fair Corporation and Lincoln Center over the settlement of the fair's notes. Despite these difficulties, the fair managed to attract millions of visitors in its last few months and Moses had enough money left over to execute some

park development in Flushing Meadows, though nowhere near the scale originally planned.

The financial problems of the 1964-1965 fair and its association with Moses, whose reputation was severely marred by the fair's end, no doubt has tarnished perceptions of the fair itself. Yet little scholarly attention has been paid to most fairs that occurred after World War II; these later fairs have been ignored primarily in favor of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fairs that are often viewed through the lens of nostalgia and can be regarded as events that optimistically presented progress through technology and culture. Studying fairs such as the New York World's Fair of 1964-1965 sheds light on their significance during the postwar period and underscores the intricate networks of power required to realize such complicated and complex events.