

More Fair Cities:  
Utilizing World's Fairs to Achieve Contemporary Planning and Policy Objectives

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**Abstract**

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This research seeks to determine if World's Fairs, or International Expos, could be utilized by contemporary urban planners and policymakers to promote policy objectives and effectively address policy challenges in United States cities. The researcher uses a mixed-methods approach, primarily conducting a literature review while employing comparative elements of a case study to determine the effects Fairs have on their surrounding environment and the feasibility of employing them for lasting urban policy change. The work finds that Fairs could be uniquely beneficial to municipalities with certain needs, though they are not an especially generalizable or scalable policy intervention. This research comes as the U.S. federal government has reengaged with the international organization overseeing Expos and as the Twin Cities region in Minnesota is actively bidding to host an International Expo in 2027.

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## Introduction

In my first year studying urban planning, I heard, read, and saw countless references to the lasting impacts of World’s Fairs—also called International Expos—on the built and cultural environment of cities across the United States and globe. From what I learned, they seemed to be key events in the history of urban planning that greatly altered and impacted the built environment of host cities in unique and lasting ways. It was interesting to me then when I began considering relevant topics for a thesis that, given the broad possibility for impacting the built environment, no U.S. city had hosted a World’s Fair for nearly 40 years, while they have continued to be held in other nations. Had American planners and other urban policymakers stopped utilizing one of the most lasting and cost-effective strategies for altering the built environment? Or was this tool instead outdated, of little relevance in the digital age, and a relic of planning’s past?

Though the US State Department had previously withdrawn from participation with the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE, or International Bureau of Expositions), the intergovernmental organization overseeing Expos, in 2017 the nation officially reengaged with the passage of H.R. 534, the “U.S. Wants to Compete for a World Expo Act”. With President Biden and Congress supportive of the Expo 2027 bid for Bloomington, Minnesota, just outside the Twin Cities, the United States *may* be on the precipice of a renewed era of relevance for World’s Fairs.<sup>1</sup>

Hotbeds of new ideas and cutting-edge innovation, Fairs in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries were proving grounds for advances in human ingenuity, particularly within the urban policy and planning context. As described by Sam Lubell of *The New York Times* “Since its inception, the

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<sup>1</sup> “About - EXPO 2027,” EXPO 2027, n.d., <https://expo2027.us/about/>.

World's Fair has been a way of telling a story through architecture, planning and experience.”<sup>2</sup> They were also, frequently, emblematic of the worst of contemporary practices, poised at the forefront of cultural imperialism. Any future Expo planning effort must be cognizant of and reckon with that past.

Yet the effects of Fairs and Expos are clearly durable in ways other urban policy interventions are not. At the same time, cities across the United States are facing seemingly insurmountable policy challenges. On issues like aging infrastructure, housing affordability, and climate resiliency among many, many others, contemporary urban planners and policymakers sometimes find it hard, if not impossible, for the speed of their solutions to match an intensifying pace of urgency—particularly when those solutions are hemmed in by the financial constraints of municipal or state government.

Megaevents, such as World's Fairs, have the potential to present otherwise unparalleled opportunities for financial, creative, and political capital to focus combined effort on a specific project, amplifying the impact that any one sector could have individually. In this expanded scope lies, in theory, the opportunity to address serious urban policy issues that otherwise could not be approached in such a comprehensive and timely manner.

There are reasons to be skeptical of megaevents and this work will take care to highlight those criticisms, but one of the primary questions underpinning this paper, and the perspective from which it is written, is questioning if it a mistake for the planner to think of megaevents as an unmitigated ill and better to steer clear of than pursue. Or, could they instead be guided by contemporary ideals and values to be equitable, sustainable, and broadly beneficial to society and the built environment?

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<sup>2</sup> Sam Lubell, “A World-Class World Expo,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/24/world/world-expo-dubai.html>.

This thesis is, admittedly, informed in part by personal experience. As an undergraduate, I spent four years living in campus housing that had been constructed to serve as a venue for another megaevent—the Olympic Village for the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City. This was one of many interventions made for the Salt Lake City Olympics that is still in operation, having been utilized by Utahns and visitors daily for the last two decades.

Having been born and raised in Utah for the first 25 years of my life, from my own perspective it is clear that “the Games” transformed Salt Lake and the state, both in its built environment and its culture. The consensus among Utahns is that the Games were a resounding success, as exemplified by recently polling showing support among nearly 80% of state residents for an ongoing bid to bring the Olympics back to Salt Lake.<sup>3</sup> As we will see, as with World’s Fairs and Expos of the past, the Olympics conferred on Salt Lake City a level of national and international attention—and financial investment—that would have been difficult to garner through other means. The lasting effects on the region’s built environment have been substantial.

Like the Olympic Games, World’s Fairs are temporary international megaevents that require significant infrastructure to be built by the host city. This must include venues for national and corporate pavilions, performance spaces, and all the necessary facilities to welcome millions of tourists and dignitaries, among countless other considerations. Also like the Olympics, the structures these events leave behind can have significant impacts on the surrounding community. But where Fairs distinguish themselves from the Olympic Games most notably—and the reason why this thesis is not a study of Olympic Games—is that the

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<sup>3</sup> Lisa Riley Roche, “Utah’s Support for Bringing Back the Olympics Makes Headlines,” *Deseret News*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.deseret.com/utah/2022/8/3/23290504/poll-support-utah-olympics-2030-bid-makes-headlines>.

infrastructure and facilities that remain after the conclusion of Fairs have proven to be far more adaptable and valuable for common urban uses than facilities for the Olympics.

So then, if Expos can have such lasting and unique impacts on our cities, should they be reimagined and proposed by the 21st Century urban planner as a means to advance solutions to the most challenging issues facing our cities today?

Note: “World’s Fairs”, “International Expositions”, and “International Exhibitions” are all terms that have been used to refer to the same type of event. Beginning in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the term “Expo” began to be used as well.<sup>4</sup> Though there are some distinctions between the terms, in this work and in line with other researchers, I will use them interchangeably.

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<sup>4</sup> John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Encyclopedia of World’s Fairs and Expositions* (McFarland, 2008), 8.

## Methods

This thesis seeks to answer if World's Fairs could be utilized by contemporary urban policymakers and planners to effectively address serious issues being faced in US cities. Fully answering this question requires an incremental approach, chronicling the historical importance and contemporary effects of prior US Fairs, then looking abroad to 21<sup>st</sup> Century examples. I will then return to the United States context to discuss Bloomington, Minnesota's bid for Expo 2027 and its relevance to this subject. Finally, I will synthesize and analyze the gathered information to determine if the proposed policy intervention—World's Fairs—could be effective in addressing municipal challenges.

To address this question, I have called on primary and secondary sources to research each American fair, conducting a survey of those most applicable to addressing urban policy aims. Through that research, I have selected three Expos which more broadly represent the most relevant categories of issues Fairs have addressed and the short and long-term effects those interventions have had in the time since the initial event concluded. I will discuss each, determining their policy goals prior to the Expo and measuring the levels of success for that goal. This section will seek to demonstrate the lasting effects of World's Fairs on urban culture and form, particularly when planned and designed to fulfill a specific, lasting purpose.

The three 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fair host cities this thesis will study—San Diego, Seattle, and Spokane—each represent different eras and approaches to hosting an Expo. Through this section, I will make takeaways and conclusions about the best practices for planners considering the method as a policy response.

I will then look across the globe, analyzing the effects of contemporary Expos on the environment of their host regions, noting the similarities and differences between these events

and Fairs of the past. I will look especially at if and how those events have addressed sizeable urban issues. What were those issues? Have they promoted causes of equity and sustainability? Have they been good stewards of their community? How have Expo facilities been used, if at all, in the years after the event left town? And importantly, have Expos sought to address urban planning and policy issues and, if so, are the solutions and methods they found transferable to the context of the United States? While there is valuable research looking into these Expos, information is more limited and in many cases enough time has not elapsed to see the full impact these events have had on their built environments. As such, this section will not be a case study of these Fairs but will instead analyze them more holistically.

I will then discuss Minnesota's pending bid for Expo 2027. This section relies most heavily on interviews conducted for this thesis as well as publicly available information from bid organizers.

Finally, I will analyze and synthesize my collected information to determine if Expos should be proposed by the 21st Century urban planner or policymaker as a means to advance solutions to challenging issues facing cities today, highlighting which issues could potentially be best addressed by Expos.

Before conducting my research, I determined several potential outcomes for this work. First, the hypothesis could be proven. Expos *could* be used as a means for effective policy interventions. This conclusion would be satisfied through an analysis of given Fairs and the success of the broader municipal goals set out *before* the event and measuring the success in the years following.

Another possible finding was that, while the concept of an urban policy-guided event may be beneficial to the host region or society at large, it is either financially untenable or impossible to achieve under the framework set and governed by the BIE. Under this situation, one could imagine proposing a theoretical alternative event to fill the niche in policy-focused and place-based megaevents that may be determined to exist.

There may also be a tangible, insurmountable reasons why the US has not hosted an Expo in over 40 years. Perhaps the financial structures or outlook since the unprofitable Fairs of the past have not changed substantially enough to make future Expos viable.

Or perhaps there is no longer a need for World's Fairs at all. It is likely not a coincidence that the decline of Fairs in America aligns with the maturation of the theme park industry and, more specifically, following the opening of EPCOT Center in 1982 which was, at opening, essentially a permanent World's Fair in the United States. Even if Expos and Fairs have demonstrated success in an evolved model that is less dependent on theme park-style attractions, as has been done internationally, may Expos still be irrelevant in the age of the Internet and virtual reality?

These questions, and others, I seek to answer through the following paper.

## Historical Fairs: Expos in the United States from 1915-1974

While once iconic cultural touchstones and magnetic draws for millions of global visitors, World's Fairs have been, in the nearly 40 years since one has been held in the United States, largely forgotten by general culture. Where they are remembered, it is often as answers to trivia questions about the advent of, say, the dish washer<sup>5</sup> or the Ferris Wheel.<sup>6</sup> This is emblematic of the far fall Expos have experienced since their most relevant era, when they served as centers of popular taste and innovation and were fundamental to the establishment of national and regional identities. In his book on Fairs in the United States from 1876 to 1916, historian Robert W. Rydell goes so far as to describe Fairs during their most relevant as holding “the scepter of cultural sovereignty.”<sup>7</sup> There, titans and prospective titans of industry, art, and political thought could premier their latest advances to enthusiastic global audiences.

Fairs are not readily remembered for their lasting impacts on life, society, and urban form, despite evidence of those impacts being readily present. In the introduction to the book *Fair America*, authors write that “to say that World's Fairs have exerted a formative influence on the way Americans have thought about themselves and the world in which they live probably understates the importance of those expositions.”<sup>8</sup> In a foreword to the *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions* by Findling and Pelle, the Secretary General of the BIE, Vicente González

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<sup>5</sup> HISTORY. “6 Everyday Inventions That Debuted at World's Fairs,” January 12, 2022. <https://www.history.com/news/worlds-fairs-inventions>.

<sup>6</sup> Jamie Malanowski, “The Brief History of the Ferris Wheel,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 20, 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-ferris-wheel-180955300/>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Smithsonian Institution, 2000), 1.

Loscertales, has an even grander perspective. “At its most successful, an expo projects a vision for the future of humankind,” he says.<sup>9</sup>

To be clear, great harms have been caused by historical Fairs. Contemporary World’s Fair scholarship is mindful to thoroughly discuss and analyze the history of cultural imperialism bolstered by Fairs. Rydell notes the important and distinct role Fairs played in that advance.

“World’s Fairs existed as part of a broader universe of white supremacist entertainments; what distinguished them were their scientific, artistic, and political underpinnings. Whether or not they were the most important source for shaping racial beliefs, they certainly were among the most authoritative.”<sup>10</sup>

There have also been deleterious effects to the built environment caused by Fairs. In a *New York Times* interview with Cornell Associate Professor of City and Regional Planning Jennifer Minner, she pointed to cities that hoped to revitalize their downtown centers through use of a Fair but achieved mixed results: “They emphasized getting rid of the old but were less diligent about replacing it with something new.”<sup>11</sup> That drive to “get rid of the old” would lead to significant consequences both in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century in cities like San Antonio (1968) and Shanghai (2010), where Expo efforts displaced individuals, families, and communities.<sup>12</sup>

Expos would evolve greatly in the decades following their advent. This section seeks to detail some of that evolution, beginning in 1915 and continuing until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

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<sup>9</sup> Vicente González Loscertales, “Foreword,” in *Encyclopedia of World’s Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Robert W. Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Conrad De Aenlle, “World’s Fairs and Their Legacies,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/04/arts/international/worlds-fairs-and-their-legacies.html>.

<sup>12</sup> De Aenlle, “World’s Fairs and Their Legacies.”

Panama-California Exposition (1915-16) – San Diego, CA

In the early 1900s, San Diego was far from the sprawling metropolis it is today. As Los Angeles to the north percolated as the hub of a growing motion picture industry and San Francisco continued to benefit from resource extraction, processing, and trade, San Diego struggled to find its own identity and economic purpose within a growing Golden State. A World's Fair proved a potentially effective, if uncertain, solution to address the city's needs.

At the Fair, organizers hoped to “educate the people of the American West and the United States about the antiquity, culture, history, and people of the Americas and their human connections to the rest of the globe.”<sup>13</sup> An apparently noble goal, but one far less laudable in hindsight when considering the horrendously racist anthropological exhibits featured prominently at the Expo that, like other Fair exhibits of the period, advanced eugenicist ideologies.

The Fair backers also had lofty goals for what they hoped the Fair would accomplish in San Diego itself. At one level was a relatively straightforward profit-based motive. Fair backers hoped to show the nation and world what San Diego had to offer to 20<sup>th</sup> Century enterprise—namely a “twenty-two square mile harbor, growing local manufacturers, agricultural development of county lands, and the elusive, direct railroad route to East Coast markets.”<sup>14</sup>

Another aim of the San Diego Fair backers is one of the most illustrative of the unique potential utilization of World's Fairs. At the time, San Diego was largely identified by its small size, Republican politics, and Victorian architecture. But Fair backers saw an opportunity to “reinvent history to help build an urban identity for the city.”<sup>15</sup> Through the scale and concerted

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew Bokovoy, “San Diego 1915-1916,” in *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, 2008), 222.

<sup>14</sup> Bokovoy, “San Diego 1915-1916,” 222.

<sup>15</sup> Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States*.

efforts that a Fair can bring, the planners “sought to weave the history of Spain, Mexico, and Native America into the tapestry of American memory.”<sup>16</sup> They attempted to create, almost from whole cloth, a distinct, attractive city and an original regional identity inspired—or imagined—by the city’s historical past.



The 1915 Exposition at what is today Balboa Park  
*Panama-California Exposition Digital Archive*

The event would not bring just a new building or two the young city, but entire streets of baroque Spanish colonial architecture. Like many Fairs of the period, the scale was remarkable. At 640 acres, the fairgrounds were not a far cry in scale from City Beautiful movement efforts in much, much larger cities, such as New York’s Central Park which is over 800 acres.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bokovoy, “San Diego 1915-1916.” 222.

<sup>17</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Central Park | Description, History, Attractions, & Facts,” Encyclopedia Britannica, May 27, 1999, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Park-New-York-City>.

To achieve this goal, architect Bertram Goodhue would combine the Spanish Baroque style with more context-appropriate Spanish Colonial and Mission-style architecture to create, according to the San Diego History Center, the impression of “a ‘new city’ of Old Spain,”<sup>18</sup> a notable far cry from the “midwestern air” with which the city was previously associated.<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, the 1915 Fair was not the only contemporaneous effort that sought to reimagine San Diego’s built environment. Before the City had decided to bid for the ’15 event, a local department store magnate had proposed to replat the city, but urban planner John Nolen proposed plan—inspired by the city of Nice, France—was not to be. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century “[a]ll San Diego urban planning would center on the Panama-California Exposition.”<sup>20</sup>

Today, far from a municipal also-ran, San Diego is the second largest city in California, after only Los Angeles. When the Fair was held in 1915, San Diego was home to just 40,000 people.<sup>21</sup> Now, it boasts 1.39 million.<sup>22</sup>

For the built environment, and particularly in California, the Fair proved “a distinct step forward in American architecture.”<sup>23</sup> Historian Matthew Bokovoy goes even further in analyzing the impacts of the Fair. He declared it “the most important event in the cultural history of the American Southwest.”<sup>24</sup> While the Panama-California Exposition cannot take credit for the founding of Balboa Park—the arguable heart of San Diego—it can claim credit for much of its

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<sup>18</sup> “San Diego Invites the World: The 1915 Exposition, A Pictorial Essay - San Diego History Center | San Diego, CA | Our City, Our Story,” San Diego History Center | San Diego, CA | Our City, Our Story, May 31, 2016, <https://sandiegohistory.org/journals/spring-2016-san-diego-invites-world-1915-exposition-pictorial-essay/>.

<sup>19</sup> Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America: World’s Fairs in the United States*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Bokovoy, “San Diego 1915-1916,” 223.

<sup>21</sup> Bokovoy, “San Diego 1915-1916,” 222.

<sup>22</sup> United States Census Bureau QuickFacts, “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: San Diego City, California,” Census Bureau QuickFacts, n.d., <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/sandiegocitycalifornia>.

<sup>23</sup> “San Diego Invites the World: The 1915 Exposition, A Pictorial Essay.”

<sup>24</sup> Bokovoy, “San Diego 1915-1916,” 222.

look and present-day impression. The Prado, the main thoroughfare of the Expo, was lined with ornate Spanish buildings many of which, thanks to preservation efforts, remain extant to this day. Further, the architectural style the Fair exhibited became highly influential in the United States, and especially in California, where examples would spread well beyond the bounds of San Diego. “The Spanish fantasy heritage theme of the fair created a modern regional tradition, where the built environment and promotional image of Southern California was set firmly in the Indian and Spanish past,” says Bokovoy, “In the end, through public memory and the invention of tradition, the Panama-California Exposition unveiled the difficult, but promising, past at the core of California history.”<sup>25</sup>



A postcard from the 1915 Exposition shows how the Fair heavily invoked the Spanish Mission history of Southern California

*San Diego History Center*

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<sup>25</sup> Bokovoy, “San Diego 1915-1916,” 227.

Twenty years later, San Diego would again return to the idea of hosting a Fair to address specific municipal needs. In this case, in 1935, the city hoped to uplift the region during the depths of the Great Depression. There would again be direct impacts on the built environment of San Diego, with architect Richard Requa blending the Spanish styles of the previous Fair with more contemporary Art Deco flair in an effort to look towards the future while remaining “in harmony with the old buildings.”<sup>26</sup>

This specific Fair’s impact on the built environment would also extend far beyond San Diego city limits. Drawing record crowds, the Federal Housing Administration’s pavilion *The Palace of Better Housing* “showcased the latest federally approved housing designs and new twenty-year mortgages created by the National Housing Act of 1934.”<sup>27</sup> The exhibit presented to Americans a compelling, visual display of 56 miniature models of approved designs in a variety of styles.

Like many other Fairs, the ’35 Expo would also prominently and popularly feature exhibits from America’s auto manufacturers. Very characteristically, the “Earth of Auto” and “Roads of the Pacific” exhibits promoted an image of a future society dominated by the car. No doubt, then, those aspects too had untold effects on the built environment of the nation.

For reasons that will be discussed, the Fairs of this period and before are of limited use to the contemporary planner. They do demonstrate the remarkable marketing, image-making, and propagandistic power Fairs once held over the American and international community, but often,

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew Bokovoy, “San Diego 1935-1936,” in *Encyclopedia of World’s Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, 2008), 282.

<sup>27</sup> Bokovoy, “San Diego 1935-1936,” 282.

they are also cautionary tales in line with other urban revitalization and planning efforts of the period.

## Century 21 Exposition (1962) – Seattle, WA

Following World War II—and the large scale, troublesome, and unprofitable Robert Moses endeavor of the 1939 New York World’s Fair—the United States would not host another Expo for over 15 years. During this time, across the country from New York, Seattle, Washington was a city still waiting to arrive.

When describing this era, former City Councilmember Jean Godden opined, “people in the East and Midwest, if they thought about Seattle at all—and most didn’t—believed the city was subarctic, perhaps a suburb of Nome, Alaska.”<sup>28</sup> While the city’s prominence in the United States at that time was modest, local backers were brimming with outsized enthusiasm and ambition.<sup>29</sup> They proposed that Seattle should host the world for an International Exposition. Front of mind may have been a perceived need by local industrial leaders to diversify the economy of the region away from the aerospace industry and Boeing, on which the greater Seattle labor market had become increasingly reliant following the War.<sup>30</sup>

Boeing presented another concern as well. As noted by John M. Findlay in his essay on the Century 21 Exposition compiled in the *Encyclopedia of World’s Fairs and Expositions*:

“With its plants located away from the city center, the airplane manufacturer was a powerful force for suburbanization. And as in so many other metropolitan areas during the postwar period, Seattle's downtown was threatened by the growth of sprawling subdivisions, the construction of outlying shopping malls, the embrace of automobiles and new highways, and the beginning of inner-city decay. Those who wanted to bring a second

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<sup>28</sup> Jean Godden, “The Fair That Launched the Future,” February 27, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180613172119/http://godden.seattle.gov/2012/02/27/the-fair-that-launched-the-future/>.

<sup>29</sup> “Edward E. Carlson,” n.d., <https://horatioalger.org/members/member-detail/edward-e-carlson>.

<sup>30</sup> John M. Findlay, “Seattle 1962,” in *Encyclopedia of World’s Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, 2008), 323.

world's fair to Seattle were intending to counteract the effects of suburban development on downtown, particularly on retail trade and property values. By locating a world's fair somewhere in the vicinity of the central business district, downtown leaders hope to direct greater attention and resources to a part of the city that seemed to be getting passed by.”<sup>31</sup>

The concept was not entirely novel for the city. Seattle had previously hosted a World’s Fair in 1909 on the campus of the University of Washington. Dubbed the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, that Expo proved indeed a notable, if fleeting moment for the city. With grounds designed by the Olmsted Brothers (sons of the acclaimed landscape architect behind of New York’s Central Park, Fredrick Law Olmsted) and an opening ceremony attended, albeit via telegraph, by President William Howard Taft, the event certainly garnered attention not typical for Seattle at that period.

Yet the impacts of that Expo were short-lived. As conveyed in his book *Seattle: Past to Present*, author Roger Sale writes that just a decade after the AYP Expo’s run ended “Seattle had reached a dead end. Its business and manufacture reverted to an emphasis on basic extractive industry, its active and varied labor movement was smashed, its politics had become moribund, and its growth was at a standstill.”<sup>32</sup> Seattle’s first attempt at hosting a World’s Fair failed to be transformative for the young city.

Despite those past shortcomings, however, backers of the mid-Century Fair bid seemed to believe that this latest attempt had the possibility to launch Seattle out of relative obscurity, onto the global stage, and into the esteemed upper echelons of truly *metropolitan* American cities.

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<sup>31</sup> Findlay, “Seattle 1962,” 323.

<sup>32</sup> Roger Sale, *Seattle, Past to Present* (University of Washington Press, 2019).

There were numerous other goals for the Seattle Expo, ranging from the municipal to the geopolitical. At the local level, both backers and citizens saw an opportunity to renovate existing infrastructure and create a permanent cultural hub. In fact, when Seattle voters approved a \$8,500,000 bond for acquisition of the Fair site, they were asked to approve the construction of a civic center, that just so happened to be able to host an Expo.

The initiative stated: “Shall the City of Seattle issue \$8,500,000.00 of general obligation bonds for the purpose of acquiring a civic center site within the area bounded generally by 7th Avenue, Madison Street, Boren Avenue and Alder Street, constructing and equipping a convention and concert hall thereon, acquiring additional land adjacent to the Civic Auditorium and converting the Civic Auditorium into a sports and exposition center?”

From the beginning then, a goal for supporters of a second Seattle Fair was to build a world class civic center. Hosting a World’s Fair seemed a feasible means to achieve that goal. It was always understood that when the Fair left, the new civic center would remain.

The site described in the ballot initiative was chosen for multiple reasons. Some were sensible, such as capitalizing on existing assets already on the site. Some were expedient and in line with deleterious urban planning practice of the time. In a historic context statement of Queen Anne, the wider neighborhood that would host the Fair, Florence K. Lentz and Mimi Sheridan write:

“Downtown fair organizers looked to the existing Civic Center complex, for several good reasons. The Auditorium, the Armory, and Memorial Field already served as citywide venues for dances, concerts, and athletic events. The location was easily accessible from downtown. Further, the area surrounding this complex had grown shabby by the late 1950s. The ‘Warren Avenue slum’ contained some of the oldest housing

stock, apartments, and commercial buildings in the city. Redeveloping this neighborhood would further the city's goals of reducing slum and blight around the downtown."<sup>33</sup>

At the federal level, the Eisenhower and then Kennedy administrations were eager to show a nation rattled by the Soviet Union's successful launch of *Sputnik* that the United States remained at the forefront of scientific advancement—and that it could put on a better Fair than was exemplified by the nation's lackluster pavilion at Brussels' Expo in 1958. There, the US pavilion was seen to have not as successfully represented the nation as had the USSR's—which featured a model of *Sputnik*.<sup>34</sup> For them and others similarly aligned, a Seattle Expo presented an opportunity to showcase American scientific prowess and promote scientific innovation in hopes of generational returns.

Originally themed a "Festival of the West", plans did little to eschew the city's frontier reputation, which was itself bolstered by the 1909 AYP Expo. Advertising professionals, however, had an alternate vision for the name and theme of a Fair—one that would fully capitalize on the percolating public imagination of the Space Age and align with the science-themed, forward-looking aims of the federal government: The Century 21 Exposition.<sup>35</sup>

The Fair of the future would need an appropriate icon. While the exact location of where prominent Fair backer Edward Carlson would pen his most famous work is disputed (some say a bar, some, appropriately for Seattle, suggest a coffee shop), the canvas he used is not contested. Reaching for the paper most readily available to him in the moment, Carlson sketched his idea of an icon for the Expo on a napkin. Consisting of a narrow column topped by an askew, oblong

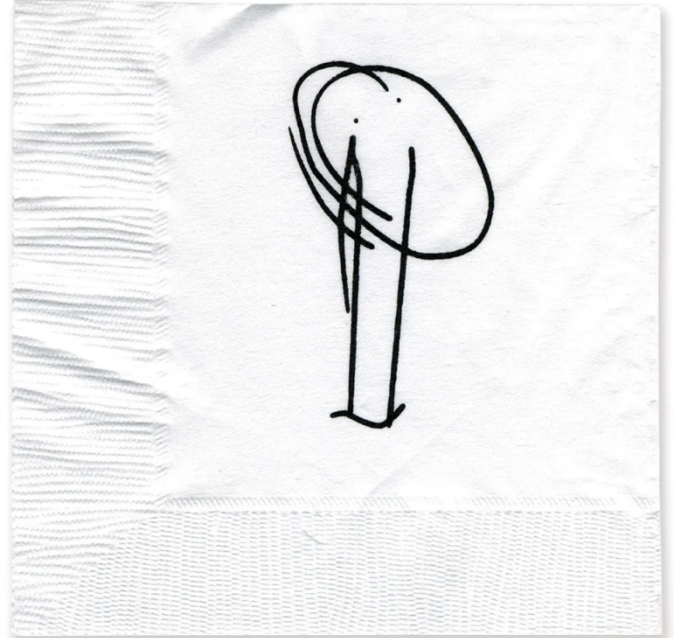
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<sup>33</sup> Florence K. Lentz and Mimi Sheridan, *Queen Anne Historic Context Statement*, October, 2005, 22. <https://web.archive.org/web/20100607192530/http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/preservation/ContextQueenAnneStatement2005.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States*, 100.

<sup>35</sup> Findlay, "Seattle 1962," 324.

circular structure, Carlson's drawing was abstract at best, looking more like a lollipop or a tethered balloon than a towering structure of concrete, steel, and glass. Rough and devoid of much detail, one must squint to see how this initial drawing would result in a finished product. Still, it had the unmistakable mark of potential.



Edward Carlson's first draft  
for the icon of the Century 21 Exposition  
*Seattle Met*

In the coming months and years, Carlson's idea would be iterated upon by professional architect Victor Steinbrueck of the University of Washington, among others. The central shaft became tapered, giving the structure an unmistakable silhouette. The oblong top flattened and sharpened to resemble a flying saucer, with plans for this portion to house a restaurant that would host unparalleled views of the city skyline, the Puget Sound, and the Olympic and Cascade Mountain ranges. Above the saucer, a large flagpole would top the structure out at just over 600 feet, making it, at the time, the tallest west of the Mississippi River.<sup>36</sup>

After overcoming funding obstacles, in April 1961 ground broke for the icon. Construction would be completed in less than nine months. From Edward Carlson's napkin had risen the Space Needle.

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<sup>36</sup> "Space Needle History," Space Needle, October 8, 2020, <https://www.spaceneedle.com/history>.

The grounds themselves would be at a radically different scale than Expos of the past. Instead of the hundreds and hundreds of acres, Seattle's fairground was instead just 74 acres.<sup>37</sup> This represented a stark departure from the United States' most recent Expo at that point. The 1939 New York World's Fair developed 1,200 acres in Queens.<sup>38</sup> Seattle's Fair proved far more appropriate for the urban context.



Seattle's 1962 Century 21 Expo and surrounding urban context  
*HistoryLink*

The Century 21 Exposition would go on to be a resounding success. It covered its costs to turn a profit, welcomed over 9.6 million visitors to Seattle, and demonstrated a model for World's Fairs that was far less temporary and wasteful and instead cognizant of the permanent urban context in which the fairgrounds would be forever set.<sup>39</sup> While New York's 1939 Fair had

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<sup>37</sup> Grant Wong, "The Rise and Fall of World's Fairs," *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-rise-and-fall-of-worlds-fairs-180979946/>.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Taylor, "The 1939 New York World's Fair," *The Atlantic*, November 1, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/11/the-1939-new-york-worlds-fair/100620/>.

<sup>39</sup> Findlay, "Seattle 1962," 324.

relied on the expansive vision and planning of Robert Moses, Seattle instead opted for a smaller-scale experience, designed and staffed by former Disneyland employees and contractors.<sup>40</sup> And the results showed. A cultural critic for *Harper's Magazine* said of the Fair, "Compared with most world's fairs, indeed with any that I can think of, [the Century 21 Expo] is polite, perky, rather than pretentious, and lovable rather than overwhelming."<sup>41</sup>

Though abstract, it is difficult to understate the myriad impacts the Century 21 Exposition had on the national and international profile of Seattle. When asked about the difference between his city and Seattle, then-mayor of Portland, Oregon John E. Clark said simply "[Seattle] had a World's Fair. And we didn't."<sup>42</sup>

Each aim of backers for the Century 21 Exposition articulated above was successful, not just at the time of the Fair, but to the present day.

The Century 21 Exposition rebranded the city almost completely. Following the Expo, instead of a town of the fringe of Alaska and the Yukon, Seattle became a city on the cutting edge of scientific advancement. Headquarters to many of the world's top companies, the region remains a bastion of American innovation with futurism and technology arguably now as associated with the city's identity as coffee and rain.

What then was Seattle *physically* left with after the Century 21 Exposition? As described by John Findlay:

"The most concrete legacy to the city was the fairgrounds, which was transformed after 1962 into the district known as the Seattle Center. From the start of planning, local

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<sup>40</sup> Findlay, "Seattle 1962," 327-328.

<sup>41</sup> Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States*, 105.

<sup>42</sup> Godden, "The Fair That Launched the Future."

organizers had insisted that an international exposition should produce a cultural infrastructure for a city lacking in adequate facilities for the performing and visual arts and professional sports. Using funds earmarked for the fair by local, state, and national governments, as well as by corporate exhibit exhibitors, Seattle added new buildings and converted older ones into a single complex capable of supporting opera, the symphony orchestra, theater, ballet, and museums...The city now had venues that were appropriate for a substantial metropolis.”<sup>43</sup>

In all, roughly 75% of buildings constructed for the Expo were permanent and remained after it closed, a far departure from previous, more temporary American fairs.<sup>44</sup>

Many elements of the Expo contributed to its mission of scientific promotion. The U.S. Science Pavilion—perhaps the Fair’s most impressive—utilized a “space Gothic” architectural style to imbibe into the building’s structure and form a near religious reverence for the scientific. The building, designed by acclaimed Japanese American architect Minora Yamasaki, is now home to the Pacific Science Center, which continues the Expo’s legacy of scientific promotion, serving nearly a million people annually.<sup>45</sup>

The forward-looking legacy of the Expo remains palpable over 60 years after its completion, thanks in no small part to the constant presence of its sleek, visionary, and undoubtedly sci-fi trademark center piece. In an interview years after the Fair’s conclusion, architect Victor Steinbrueck’s noted of the Space Needle “It’s narrow. It’s an hourglass figure, perhaps a little bit like the city of Seattle.”<sup>46</sup> Maybe that has been key to the structure’s longevity

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<sup>43</sup> Findlay, “Seattle 1962,” 328.

<sup>44</sup> Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America: World’s Fairs in the United States*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> “About PacSci,” Pacific Science Center, April 10, 2023, <https://pacificsciencecenter.org/about/>.

<sup>46</sup> *Crosscut*. “Who Really Designed the Space Needle?,” August 29, 2022. <https://crosscut.com/podcast/crosscut-reports/1/1/podcast-who-really-designed-space-needle>.

as, while designed as a monument to the Space Age and mid-century futurism, the Space Needle has come to be an abstract monument not for an elected official, donor, or tragedy, but for the City of Seattle itself. Further than that, the privately owned structure still operates as a rotating bar and observation platform and, while exact figures are not publicly available and annual revenue estimates for the operation range considerably, it is in the range of tens of millions of dollars.

Beyond a tourist attraction though, the Needle, like the Fair that spurred its creation, is weaved into the fabric of the city. The built environment of the city responds and reacts to the Space Needle and Seattle Center and vice-versa. As discussed by Needle historian Knute Berger “The Needle, in short, is part of the fabric of a changing city, and what happens at ground level is key to what works at 600 feet in the air.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Knute Berger, *Space Needle: The Spirit of Seattle* (Documentary Media LLC and University of Washington, 2012), 161.

*The International Exposition of the Environment (1974) – Spokane, WA*

At this point, if one sees the potential benefits from the lasting impacts of Fairs, they might begin to question if the BIE-sanctioned event is necessary to achieve those impacts. In fact, if World's Fairs have proven to be most effective when modified to fit their time and spatial context, would increased flexibility afforded by organizing one's own global-scale or smaller, regional event not provide the same opportunities as a World's Fair but with fewer constraints? Perhaps it could be done—and given the scale of investment required to host a BIE-sanctioned event, all avenues should be explored before a city begins the bidding process for an Expo. However, significant capital and opportunity are opened up when official recognition and association with the BIE is awarded.

This is precisely what Fair boosters found in Spokane after analysts were hired to determine the feasibility of an independently-organized exposition combined in celebration of Spokane's centennial. Organizers did not begin with the aim of hosting a Fair, instead their aim was to revitalize the city's downtown district.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately though, they concluded that an independently organized event “would not yield enough money to complete needed civic improvements.”<sup>49</sup> So, twelve years after Seattle hosted the Century 21 Exposition, the state of Washington would again welcome the world to a Fair, this time in the eastern side of the state near the Idaho and British Columbia borders in Spokane.

Though from the same state, Spokane was a far different city from Seattle—and at an entirely different scale. At one third the size and less well-known, the bid even prompted Ford

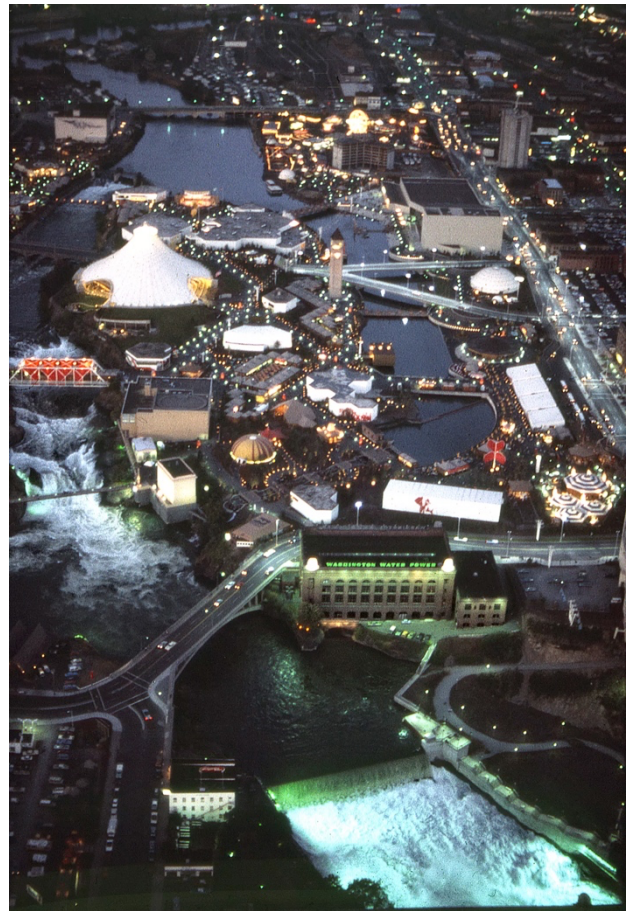
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<sup>48</sup> Arlin C. Migliazzo, “Spokane 1974,” in *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, 2008), 350.

<sup>49</sup> Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States*, 116.

Motor Company's Lee Iacocca to question "Where the hell is Spokane?".<sup>50</sup> The city was the smallest to ever host an Expo.<sup>51</sup>

Before the Fair opened, boosters hoped to notably effect the urban and natural environment of Spokane and the region. In concert with a burgeoning environmentalist movement, the Spokane event was officially dubbed the International Exposition on the Environment. As with most Expos, the fairground site, immediately adjacent to and easily accessible from downtown, was ideal for its potential to draw visitors to the city and local businesses. More uniquely, backers also utilized the opportunity afforded by the Expo to propose remediation for the polluted Spokane River. Acquisition of the site was made possible by the Fair, allowing for direct negotiations with railroads and other title holders to acquire the then privately-held 100 industrial acre site.<sup>52</sup>



Fairgrounds for the 1974 Expo along the Spokane River  
*The Spokesman-Review*

When the Expo itself began, as in Seattle, critics noted the appropriate scale of the Expo. *The Christian Science Monitor* called it "a pocket-sized exposition that's on a good human scale."<sup>53</sup> As in Seattle too, Spokane's Expo attracted millions of visitors and left a lasting legacy

<sup>50</sup> Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States*, 117.

<sup>51</sup> Migliazzo, "Spokane 1974," 352.

<sup>52</sup> Migliazzo, "Spokane 1974," 350.

<sup>53</sup> Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States*, 117.

for the city. While attendance expectations were exceeded, ticket pricing issues and inflation caused the Fair to have a revenue shortfall north of \$700,000, but this was easily made up through collecting a portion of outstanding pledges, allowing the Fair to break even.<sup>54</sup>

If only a modest success in direct financial returns, the overall economic impact of the fair was watershed for the region. Arlin C. Migliazzo writes “The fair generated 4,000 jobs and an immediate economic benefit to Spokane of between \$125 million and \$139 million. The estimated long term \$699 million return to the Spokane area in revitalized downtown commerce and increased tourism over the ensuing decade was nearly nine times the cost of the exposition (\$78 million).”<sup>55</sup>

The lasting returns for the built environment of downtown Spokane and other communities on the Spokane River were just as impactful. “Spokane was true to the fair’s theme by building a state-of-the-art sewage treatment plant that did much to clean up the Spokane River. In addition, the fair inspired new building in downtown Spokane, including a skywalk system, a hotel, two bank towers, and a large department store...In 1976 the fair site reopened as Riverfront Park.”<sup>56</sup>

Building on the Seattle model, Spokane’s Expo illustrated how a smaller-scale, well planned, and thematically resonant Fair can have impacts on the host city and region. Importantly, it did so in a city of a much smaller size than had been accomplished previously, a big boon for the Expo concept’s adaptability to various urban settings.

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<sup>54</sup> Migliazzo, “Spokane 1974,” 352.

<sup>55</sup> Migliazzo, “Spokane 1974,” 352.

<sup>56</sup> Migliazzo, “Spokane 1974,” 352.

Unlike Seattle's Fair, Spokane's was what was deemed a "Category II Exposition" by the BIE, which narrowed the subject, timeframe, and scale of the Fair, but also afforded more local control for its design and planning.<sup>57</sup> This focus proved highly appropriate not just for Spokane, but also Seattle which, though not a Category II Exposition, was of similar size.

Perhaps most importantly, the Fair made a considerable contribution to the early environmentalism movement, providing "a pivotal international focus on the environment unparalleled at the time."<sup>58</sup> The Spokane fair likewise provides a model for the type of global issues that can be highlighted at an Expo in an era where Cold War soft power struggles are less relevant and financially motivating. It also was the first to primarily focus on the long-term health of society and the environment, an issue that World's Fairs would find a natural one to champion in the years to come.

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<sup>57</sup> Migliazzo, "Spokane 1974," 350.

<sup>58</sup> Migliazzo, "Spokane 1974," 351.

## Contemporary Fairs: Expos Around the Globe from 2000-2027

In 1984, though they would occasionally participate as pavilion sponsors in other nations, the United States would effectively withdraw from International Expos. Louisiana, which hosted an Expo that year is the obvious reason why. According to Expo historian and commentator Charles Pappas:

“New Orleans had the dubious distinction of going broke before the fair ended. And that really kind of crystallized the idea that fairs just can't be run anymore, that there's no attraction to them, that there's nothing new they can show the way they used to. But as we've seen though, in the last few years, that's been turned upside down especially by Shanghai and now Dubai, where in a real way they're bringing the future to the world.”<sup>59</sup>

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has indeed proven a massive shift for World's Fairs and International Expositions. For one, they have moved away almost entirely from what have traditionally been considered “western” nations, instead highlighting new parts of the world where Fairs have seldom, or never, been hosted.

Expo 2010 would become the first officially recognized Expo to be held in a developing nation. Expo 2020 would see the event's first foray in the Middle East. These nations have seen the benefits Fairs have provided to other nations in the past and now hope to capitalize on them for their own cities. As Charles Pappas noted in an interview conducted for this thesis with regards to contemporary Expo hosts, “they know exactly what the power of Expos are... They don't do this for fun. They do this because it puts them on the map in terms of actual political power and benefit to their own society.” He cites the lack of more recent US interest in Fairs to

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<sup>59</sup> James Pethokoukis, “The Techno-Optimism of World's Fairs: My Long-Read Q&A with Charles Pappas,” American Enterprise Institute., November 12, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/economics/the-techno-optimism-of-worlds-fairs-my-long-read-qa-with-charles-pappas/>.

an “unfortunate American predilection to turning inwards.” If not done here, then there is no interest.

While America has stood on the sidelines, though, contemporary Fairs have demonstrated a shift in how Expo planners have viewed their lasting contributions to the natural and urban setting. Dr. Dingliang Yang, an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota College of Design and board member for the state’s Expo 2027 bid has said that Fairs can be an “experimental field to show the future will be better.” Minnesota’s bid, as will be discussed, has had their planning efforts rooted in the “urbanistic legacy” of their proposal from the beginning.

Hanover, Germany (Expo 2000) and Aichi, Japan 2005 (Expo 2005) did much to forward the concept of International Expos as champions of environmental issues. Expo 2000, with the theme “Humankind – Nature – Technology, a New World Arising” sought to be the most sustainable Expo to that point, constructing very few facilities for the site and instead utilizing the world’s largest permanent fairground, to which Hannover was already home.<sup>60</sup> Despite this, too grand of ambitions, unfocused goals, and a miscalculation as to the draw of Hanover (Population: 500,000) led to a massive budget shortfall of \$1.2 billion to be borne by the German and Lower Saxony governments. Expo 2000, like many Expos before it, raises questions about the far increased risk that comes with holding such an ambitious event. Still, despite the deficit, the long-term impacts to Hanover are considerable. As Larry Maloney writes:

“In spite of its mammoth failure to live up to its expectations, Expo 2000 produced tangible benefits for the city of Hanover and the surrounding region. Improvements valued between \$5 billion and \$8 billion modernized the city including the largest open

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<sup>60</sup> Larry Maloney, “Hanover 2000,” in *Encyclopedia of World’s Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, 2008), 393.

span exhibition hall in Europe, new subway lines, upgrades to train stations and freeways, as well as a new terminal at the airport. In the short term, the University of Frankfurt estimated that the exposition helped to generate \$1.35 billion in tax revenue for the federal and local economies. Even with the layoffs that occurred more than 100,000 jobs were created due to the fair.”<sup>61</sup>

Aichi, Japan fared better. The initial aims boosters had there were quite straightforward and familiar: “promote and develop the region,”<sup>62</sup> but plans were quickly changed when nesting goshawks were found on the proposed site. In an example of the considerable evolution of World’s Fairs as a medium from the Victorian era to the present, instead of displacing the birds, the planners instead altered their plans and goals. Ultimately, “the organizers decided to scale back the Expo, leave the forest and natural features largely intact, and shift development to an already used or less sensitive ground in several widely separated areas.”<sup>63</sup> Following and inspired by this occurrence, the theme that event organizers chose could hardly have been more appropriate: “Nature’s Wisdom.” It was the greenest and most sustainable Expo to that point, contributing a park and nature trails to the site following its deconstruction (and subsequent material reuse).<sup>64</sup>

Shanghai, China (Expo 2010) and Dubai, UAE (Expo 2020, but held from 2021-2022 due to the Coronavirus pandemic), though *far* different in scale from what is proposed in Minnesota and what would likely be successful in a United States context, demonstrate precisely just how powerful International Expos can be when wielded as an urban planning tool.

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<sup>61</sup> Maloney, “Hanover 2000,” 398.

<sup>62</sup> Alfred Heller, “Aichi 2005,” in *Encyclopedia of World’s Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, 2008), 399.

<sup>63</sup> Heller, “Aichi 2005,” 399.

<sup>64</sup> Heller, “Aichi 2005,” 399.

As part of China's grand debut onto the "world stage" this World's Fair was planned to be at a grand scale, in concert with the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing.<sup>65</sup> At nearly 800 acres, the fairgrounds were *far* larger than the successful American Fairs mentioned above<sup>66</sup>, but it well-exemplifies the power World's Fairs still possess to reimagine what cities can be and promote new national identities. As noted by Susan Fernsebner prior to the Expo, "As planned, the exposition is to offer a site at which all can study issues related to Urban Development, including architecture, environmental concerns, and 'eco-friendly' methods of urban planning, as well as the relationship 'between cities and their rural hinterlands.'" Further, "the exposition is intended as take a closer look [sic] at urban space within the city as well as a city's relationship to the broader terrain that surrounds it, regionally and globally. Exposition planners have advertised their intent to explore the ways in which cities are reinvented, spatially and socially, from within."<sup>67</sup>

In what *The New York Times* dubbed "a world-class World Expo" Dubai, not only set the bar for the sustainability of future Expos, but they did so while an creating a city on former desert land.<sup>68</sup>

The site, at over 1,000 acres, was utterly massive. The Fair was divided into themed areas aligned with the Expo's subthemes of sustainability, opportunity, and mobility. In describing the fairgrounds surrounding the Expo's central feature—a large dome meant as a gathering place—Sam Lubell says, "Extending from this spot are a series of parks, pathways, wide arching

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<sup>65</sup> CBS News, "China Welcomes World To 2008 Olympics," *CBS News*, August 9, 2008, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/china-welcomes-world-to-2008-olympics/#>.

<sup>66</sup> Susan Fernsebner, "Shanghai 2010," in *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, 2008), 409.

<sup>67</sup> Fernsebner, "Shanghai 2010," 407, 409.

<sup>68</sup> Lubell, "A World-Class World Expo."

boulevards, ring roads, alleys and public art pieces, all intended to encourage interaction, easy navigation, broad sightlines and exploration.”



A walkway at Expo 2020 in Dubai  
*The New York Times*

If this reads more as an ideal urban center than a fairground, that is, quite literally, by design. Ahmed Al Khatib, the Expo’s chief development and delivery officer, was quoted as saying “Most expos leave a building or a zone behind. For us, we are actually leaving a city. Our buildings are to be converted to commercial spaces, residences, hospitals, clinics and schools.” Lubell again—“The so-called legacy mode of the expo has been built in since the beginning.”

## ***Expo 2027 – Bloomington, MN (pending bid)***

The hypothesis of this work may not take long to prove or disprove. Despite decades of gradually decreasing involvement followed by full withdrawal from participation by the United States, Minnesota, in an effort to be awarded an Expo, led a political campaign to reengage the country with this international event.<sup>69</sup> In the time since, the organizers have successfully received the backing of the government, including congressional approval and support from both Presidents Trump and Biden. Their pending bid for Expo 2027 is set to be awarded by the BIE's General Assembly in June 2023. If awarded, a Minnesota Expo 2027 could be the proof of concept needed to both remind and reassure American urban planners that, with the right ethics and safeguards, Expos can be a valuable municipal and regional asset.

In a conversation with Dr. Dingliang Yang, an accomplished urban designer and board member of Minnesota's effort, he described the desire of Expo planners and regional leaders to add another third "urban node" to the Twin Cities region, where developers can build residences, office space, housing, transportation, and "third places." The Expo's proposed theme, "Healthy People, Healthy Planet", is inspired, Expo organizers say, by United Nations Sustainability Goal 3. "[W]e will convene the world for thirteen weeks of programming organized around each of the United Nation's Thirteen Sustainable Development targets and indicators. We will have a particular focus on prevention, innovation, equalization, and collaboration. As with all Expo's, we will showcase the latest and greatest technology but also pay attention to key success indicators such as food security and access to clean water."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> "About - EXPO 2027."

<sup>70</sup> "Expo Theme - EXPO 2027," EXPO 2027, n.d., <https://expo2027.us/expo-theme/>.



Rendering of Minnesota’s Expo 2027 proposal, with proximity to public open space, Mall of America, and MSP International Airport  
*Minnesota USA Expo*

The advantages of the selected Expo site in Bloomington for both a 90-day megaevent as well as an urban node are readily apparent. Situated southeast of Minneapolis and southwest of St. Paul, Expo backers selected the site in part because of its central location “roughly in the geographical center of the Twin Cities metropolitan region.”<sup>71</sup> The location has already proven itself to be a remarkable draw as it is situated across the street from the Mall of America, the state’s most popular tourist attraction.

The Mall, which sees over 40 million visitors a year,<sup>72</sup> was built with the long and biting Minnesota winter’s front of mind. The all-indoor design followed a long tradition in the Twin

<sup>71</sup> “Expo Site - EXPO 2027,” EXPO 2027, n.d., <https://expo2027.us/expo-site/>.

<sup>72</sup> Explore Minnesota, “Top 40 Minnesota Attractions,” mn.gov, n.d., [https://mn.gov/tourism-industry/assets/TopAttractions\\_State\\_8.5x11\\_tcm1135-369762.pdf](https://mn.gov/tourism-industry/assets/TopAttractions_State_8.5x11_tcm1135-369762.pdf).

Cities region, which was the birthplace of the suburban shopping mall concept.<sup>73</sup> Now, with Expo 2027 a potential neighbor, organizers have proposed a site development that would complement the Mall of America, while making considerable efforts to transform the greater area—which was largely designed for automobile traffic—to be a complete multi-modal neighborhood with ample human-scale spaces.

The proposed site, which is currently 60 acres of surface parking owned by the Mall of America, City of Bloomington, and the Bloomington Port Authority<sup>74</sup>, is divided in two with the North and South Expo grounds to be connected by an elevated parkway and PeopleMover system. The walkway plans, at this stage, appear to call for essentially lidding a portion of 24<sup>th</sup> Ave, reclaiming a space for pedestrians while allowing it to continue to serve eight lanes of vehicle traffic. Designed from the beginning with long-term use in mind, the Expo team describe the walkway as having “places to sit and people-watch, patches of grass, seasonal blooms and special architectural features throughout” which make the parkway “not only a connector between sites but also a great place to either stay active or relax.”<sup>75</sup> As in Dubai, out of context, the elements of an Expo sound like high-quality urban design interventions.

The Expo could contribute other amenities along with its pedestrian-focused spaces. At the North Expo site, Expo backers envision a large convention space to be “the heart of international events before, during and after the Expo.”<sup>76</sup> In direct proximity to the airport and light rail transit, and with ample hotel rooms extant for Mall visitors, the location is a natural for a permanent convention space.

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<sup>73</sup> Natasha Geiling and Esri, “The Death And Rebirth of the American Mall,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 25, 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/death-and-rebirth-american-mall-180953444/>.

<sup>74</sup> “Expo Site - EXPO 2027.”

<sup>75</sup> “Expo Site - EXPO 2027.”

<sup>76</sup> “Expo Site - EXPO 2027.”

Multiple performance stages will likely remain following the event, keeping the site lively and active. Additionally, organizers identify that “conference and exhibition spaces of the North Expo site will be adaptive reused into spaces that promote ingenuity and innovation. The smaller single-story buildings, themed pavilions and host pavilion constructed in mass timber will be disassembled and reimagined into educational facilities, cultural spaces and make way for additional open space and parkland.”<sup>77</sup>

According to the organizers, “Expo 2027 has the potential to show the world how the built environment can be a vessel for health, well-being, sustainability, accessibility, and equity for all.”<sup>78</sup> In listing the values guiding development of the fairground, they cite wellness and wellbeing, universal access, equity and inclusion, sustainability, transit-oriented development, and third-place development.<sup>79</sup> Of course, identifying values and executing on those values are two separate actions. However, the prominence of these statements by Expo 2027 backers—ones that should be at the core of most urban planning interventions—should ameliorate some concerns that these events have not or would not be able to evolve in the context of the contemporary United States.

Perhaps most comforting and promising for the urban planner, though, are prominent statements about the Expo site after conclusion of the event. The site’s “legacy” is described:

“With the former Expo site as the hub, the collective Expo District will become a vibrant community of makers, entrepreneurs and creative enterprises that will serve as a catalyst for the transformation of the South Loop District. Designed around the expectations of the next generation of urban workers, the project will be anchored by a

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<sup>77</sup> “Expo Site - EXPO 2027.”

<sup>78</sup> “Expo Site - EXPO 2027.”

<sup>79</sup> “Expo Site - EXPO 2027.”

curated trade marketplace and innovation office space fully distinguished by an eclectic mix of public realm and tenant-focused amenities. The former Expo site is intended to facilitate collaboration among the best minds in the city, complemented by distinct programming within a model of a healthy community and social hub, people-first concept.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> “Expo Site - EXPO 2027.”

## Synthesis

The Expos detailed above each demonstrate various aspects of the benefits and potential pitfalls of hosting a World's Fair. While there are as many models for how to host a Fair as there have been Fairs, six takeaways stand out about International Expos that could be of use to the planner and policymaker looking to utilize them to address urban policy issues.

*1. Expos should be planned from the beginning as permanent additions to their host city.*

The first may well also be the most important. Repeatedly, the Expos that have proven most impactful in the long-term are those that were planned and designed from the beginning to have a specific impact on the built or cultural environment of a region.

Seattle Center, for example, does not exist because the city hosted a World's Fair. Plenty of cities have hosted Fairs without an asset at the civic caliber of Seattle Center to show for their efforts. Seattle Center exists as it does because Fair organizers had a plan for the site and Expo facilities' long-term use, with a clear vision for what those assets could provide to the city and its residents in perpetuity.

Design requirements for fairgrounds and regularly-utilized urban spaces are not the same. But Expos have proven repeatedly to be malleable and adjustable to different urban contexts. When Fair planners have malleable designs and considered strategies for how to transition an Expo space from temporary, mass use to regular, municipal use, the long-term effects for the city are often watershed.

- 2. Expos provide a means to increase tourism and can bolster economic activity in a city, especially in and around the Expo site.*

It is not by coincidence that Expos often begin as the collaboration of local business owners, hoping to infuse capital into the local economy and, presumably, their own endeavors. While the enrichment of local magnates is not a lofty planning goal, the spillover economic benefits are noteworthy and more broadly beneficial. Further, as in Seattle, there are often also regional economic concerns, like diversification of a local economy, that Expos can help address. As demonstrated, Expos can provide an infusion of jobs and capital before, during, and after the Fair.

Because of this common starting point, the success of Expos is often determined by the profitability of the actual Expo itself—which is to say costs, minus revenue from ticket sales, concessions, etc. As in Spokane, New Orleans, and Hanover, despite the Fairs themselves not turning a profit, the lasting economic benefits to the region far outweigh the initial investment. Even in the case of Louisiana, which would derail US World’s Fair ambitions for decades because of its financial mismanagement and massive shortfall, Charles Pappas notes that the area surrounding the Fair, which directly benefitted from its improvements, has brought in over \$81 billion to the local economy in the decades since.<sup>81</sup>

To be clear, every effort should be made to run a profitable event, not just to reward those who took on the financial risk, but to encourage future Expos and—most importantly—not leave local or state taxpayers footing the bill in the event of a revenue shortfall. At the same time, if outstanding pledges must be called in to makeup a relatively small deficit, this should not be

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<sup>81</sup> USA Expo 2020, “A Talk with Charles Pappas,” October 27, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBUMLLo8GW0>.

seen as a major drawback to Fairs if they can drastically benefit the economic and built environment of a region.

3. *Expos can significantly shape cultural aspects of a city, providing a powerful placemaking tool for urban planners.*

On the third point, Fairs have shown countless times just how powerful a tool they are for reinventing cultural identities. Sometimes this is done through the theme of the Fair, as in Seattle and Spokane. Sometimes this is done through the built environment itself as with the Space Needle and the architectural styles of the 1915 San Diego Fair. While international cultural struggles are largely outside of the purview of the planner, placemaking most certainly is not, and Fairs are proven placemaking tools of the highest degree.

As demonstrated by San Diego, an architectural style for an entire region can be created nearly whole cloth thanks to the publicity and reach Fairs have historically garnered. In Seattle, a first Fair successfully marketed the city as a frontier gateway to the greater Northwest of the continent while a second Fair completely subverted that identity to champion the city instead as a pioneer in science and technology. When it comes to intangible, cultural aims, Fairs have repeatedly—though certainly not universally—been effective.

The planner and policymaker, in coordination with other Fair backers, regional history, and the input of the community, can craft a strategy to infuse a concrete identity into a city that may not have an especially unique built form. These cultural and placemaking efforts should be taken with great care and sensitivity, fully aware of the lasting impact they can have. However, if a municipality finds reason or need to convey an identity in a way that will both last and positively contribute to the region, Fairs may be an ideal intervention.

Fairs may be most useful to the contemporary planner of *all* cities in promoting sustainability, where contemporary Expos have found a natural niche. Unique to the Expo concept is providing physical space for international audiences to learn about, experience, and discuss the latest advances in human thought and ingenuity. At a time of unparalleled global challenge, Expos have an obvious utility to advancing the cause of sustainability in our local and global communities.

*4. Expos can provide an opportunity for concerted effort across various spheres to accomplish built environment goals that would likely not be accomplishable through traditional development means.*

Through an Expo, urban interventions can be made on a scale that is extremely difficult to achieve otherwise. Spokane found this out directly. Though they explored hosting their own event to achieve the economic and built interventions they sought, studies from consultants advised them towards an Expo.

Because of this expanded scale and lasting effect, the planner or policymaker interested in what Fairs could do for their metropolitan region should look to the medium and long-term impacts of Expos and the infrastructure remaining following their closures can have on host regions in decades to come. Unlike Expos of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Expos today are planned with far fewer intentionally temporary structures. While keeping all facilities would likely prove more harm than good in most cases—as there are design decisions made for the use of a fairground that are not the best practice for regular urban use—keeping and/or reusing the vast majority of structures and spaces is critical to the viability of contemporary Expos.

Fortunately, Expos have been trending in this direction for years. When planned with the “legacy mode” front of mind, as Minnesota demonstrates, Expos can create entire urban nodes or neighborhoods that are master planned using the best of contemporary urban design principles.

*5. Fairgrounds should be at an appropriate scale and in harmony with their surrounding urban context.*

One of the most evident takeaways from successful American Fairs is that an appropriate scale is incredibly important. Expos are hard-pressed to compete with permanent theme parks that have developed attractions and infrastructure for decades. While one of the main antecedents of the theme park, Expos in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have evolved so greatly that they should not be seen as natural competitors. Therefore, Fairs in the United States should not have the same scale and form as large theme parks, as has been attempted by some Fairs in the past.

As in Spokane and Bloomington, smaller, more thematically focused “Specialized Expos” may be more appropriate for most US cities than the larger “World Expos.” Seattle, Spokane, and Minnesota’s proposed fairgrounds were of comparable size, of roughly 60-70 acres. While not a hard and fast rule, this scale seems to be appropriate for the American urban context.

Meanwhile, multiple Fairs in New York have largely failed, with their 1000+ acre site even today remaining highly underutilized. While not necessarily a hindrance to large cities—Flushing Meadows-Corona Park is a pleasant enough park—the positive impacts of a Fair would most likely be felt in smaller to medium-sized cities, perhaps looking for a municipal “big break.”

6. *Expos can be utilized to advance tangentially related municipal policy priorities.*

Perhaps the greatest benefit of Expos when compared to other megaevents is also the primary reason they are so challenging to analyze holistically—namely that they’re highly *adaptable* and *modular*. While there are specific requirements for Expo sites, there is great flexibility in how those facilities can look and interact with one another and the surrounding built environment.

As such, and as demonstrated by the remediation of the Spokane River, some creativity in concert with a World’s Fair can generate the political and financial capital necessary to address a sizeable challenge—that may only tangentially be related to the actual operation of the Fair.

This last point is perhaps the most promising. As hopefully demonstrated through this paper, World’s Fairs are a powerful medium and tool for altering the built and cultural environment of a city and region. Historically, they have been reflective of contemporary values and practices, for better and for worse. But, because they are such a powerful tool, with some creativity and capital, Fairs could be utilized to help right sizeable historic wrongs.

For example, one could imagine fairgrounds in a thoroughly developed city being constructed as a lid on an interstate or rail corridor, justifying that construction and mitigating a built intervention that has divided communities for decades. Similarly, one could see a living fair that sought to recover a site damaged by industry, with pavilions actively contributing to this purpose, much like what existed in Spokane. A Fair’s theme could also be used to promote a progressive built environment, not just in the host city but nationwide. An Expo could center on accessibility and building communal spaces welcoming to all, with exhibitors showcasing the best ideas for fostering equitable community.

The adaptability of Expos to meet the widely varying needs of a host city, region, and nation is their strongest asset. The limits to what Fairs can address is hemmed in only by imagination and political will. While each proposal would have to be analyzed individually and considered on its own merits, Fairs have the ability to make feasible major public works projects that may not be possible otherwise.

It is important to note that World's Fairs are, of course, not an *easy* intervention by any means. They require an intense amount of work, resources, and collaboration over a long period of time. They are also, though almost certainly beneficial in the long-term, still risky endeavors for individual actors and organizations, either economically or politically. Despite encouraging signs, Expos are unproven in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century American context. There is no guarantee that an Expo would have net positive lasting effects on the built and cultural environment. Further, with the most recent American Expo so far removed from popular memory, potential pitfalls could end up being a surprise.

Still, the history of Expos demonstrates that they can have incredibly significant, lasting, and unique impacts on the built environment of cities and are worth reevaluating, where contextually appropriate, as a contemporary planning solution to some contemporary planning problems.

## Conclusion

The Expos analyzed in this work each had their own unique purpose and model. Both the goals set out by Fair backers and the plans they crafted to achieve them were informed, yes, by prior Fairs and their demonstrated successes. But each was also mindful of its specific place and context, analyzing precisely what a Fair could contribute in the long-term to its host city and region.

World's Fairs are not a generalizable policy intervention. Occurring on a regular schedule and unlikely to be awarded to multiple American cities in too close of succession, they are not a viable strategy for most cities. Nor, in many cases, would they be worthwhile given the intense amount of work needed to secure and put on an Expo. However, when cities are in specific need of the effects Fairs have demonstrated to cause, then Expos could not just be a means to achieve municipal goals, but the most efficient and cost-effective way to do so.

It was not a lapse of memory, but disastrous financial performance, that kept US cities from bidding for a Fair for four decades. But this occasional past economic performance should not be a reason to reject them as an urban policy tool and strategy, which are rarely measured by how much profit they generate.

Ultimately, the urban planner, policymaker, or any other individual with an interest in the long-term success of the built environment of a place should consider what International Expos may offer their region. Instead of megaevents that leave behind civic facilities, the planner can and—if appropriate for their context—*should* consider World's Fairs first as a potential policy intervention tool to address our most sizeable challenges and create world-class urban spaces—that just so happen to have an extravagant, extended grand opening with a very, *very* large guest list.

Hosting a Fair is a gamble. It is not a guaranteed predictor of success. Because of the malleability and modularity of the concept, it is challenging to forecast or predict the results of a World's Fair when not analyzing a specific proposal. However, if the prior Fairs discussed previously demonstrate a principle, it is that with appropriate goals, planning, values, and scale, the International Expo, where appropriate, can be utilized by the urban policy maker or planner to achieve the sorts of goals on the urban—as well as the national and global—stage that are likely not accomplishable through other means. Through World's Fairs, it seems possible to powerfully impact cities to make them more vibrant, fun, innovative, collaborative, creative, just, equitable, and—potentially, yes—even fair.

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