Architecture

You Can't Go Home to Those Fairs Again

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THERE is a delightful little sleeper of a show at the New York Cultural Center called "1930's Expositions" and we commend it to you, whether you deal in first-hand memories or trendy revivalism, as an enchanted bit of nostalgia and a brief respite from the arduous presence of New York. It memorializes an innocent and romantic world that idealized past and future on the pleasure principle in an art form of equal innocence and romanticism that reached its apogee in a single decade.

The display, which consists of enlarged photographs, reconstructed models and wonderful campy souvenirs from the collection of Lawrence G. Zimmerman, was organized originally by Arnold L. Lehman for the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. You can take your moment of escapism through Nov. 25.

These were the American World's Fairs of legend, illusion and fantasy, spawned by the London Crystal Palace of 1851 and spun off by Chicago's white plaster extravaganza in 1893. There was a Century of Progress in Chicago in 1933, the California-Pacific Exposition in San Diego in 1935, the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas in 1936, the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco in 1939, and the World of Tomorrow at the New York World's Fair in an absolute orgy of excess in the same year.

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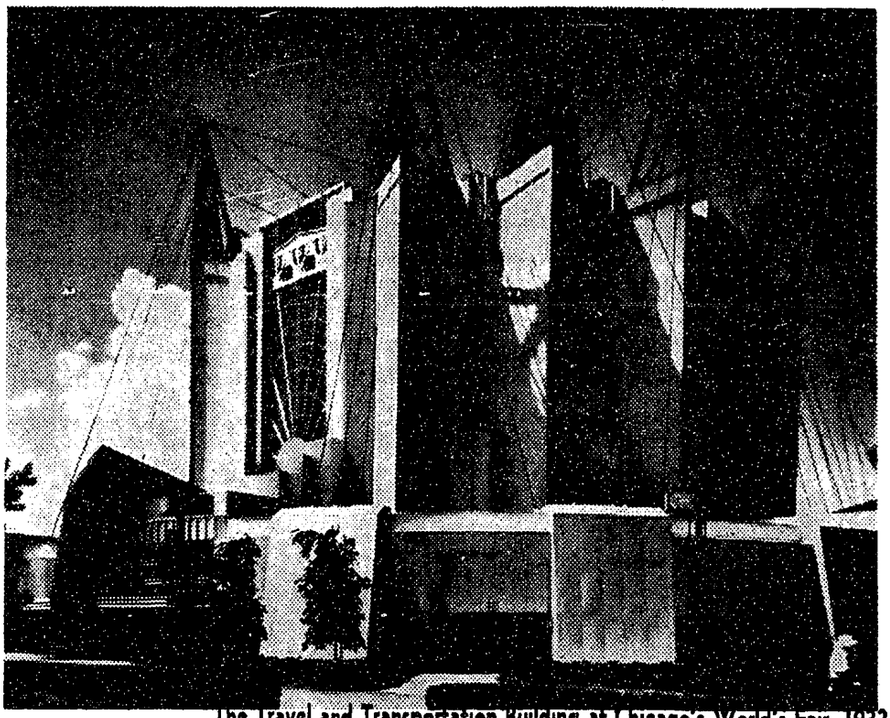
We came in at the end of the decade for the last one, as a schoolgirl, so our responses are both personal and academic. But the sight of the Trylon and Perisphere and the Futurama brought memories crowding back of fireworks-illuminated Courts of Honor, sleek, levitated soap statuary and color-washed fountains on summer evenings, with the particular bittersweet poignancy of lovely, lost times.

It is an historic era now, and the style it embodied was pure futuristic fairy tale, made of the hopes and dreams of hard times, when many needed hopes and dreams to stay alive. There was no cynicism. There was no black humor. The human condition, or one's awareness of its problems and inequities, had not reached the point where a sense of the absurd became salvation. It was an absurd world, in its own way, but we loved its flashy, streamlined promises of better things.



The Travel and Transportation Building at Chicago's World's Fair, 1933
"It was all style—the impeccably modernistic dernier cri"

These glorious, overreaching efforts, Mr. Lehman's exhibition text tells us, were "all eagerly anticipated and intensely debated during the planning years, enormously successful in terms of attendance and all generally financially unsound. Like the movies and baseball, fair-going became a recognized American pastime. In a decade of economic depression, fairs offered an escapism similar to but more tangible than Hollywood palliatives [that] easily outdrew the reality of contemporary life. . . . Great, white, magical, temporary cities thrilled millions of awed visitors."

And no wonder. Chicago's three-and-a-half-mile lakefront site in 1933 was committed to "advancement through technology" in theme and style. Its plywood and plaster buildings owed much to the *moderne* mode propagandized by the Paris Exposition of 1928, with its flat, faceted and striated surfaces, shallow ornaments of Art Deco inspiration, and smoothly curved and striped vertical and horizontal forms.

It was all style, even its technology, and it reached its peak in the Travel and Transportation Building by E. H. Bennett and Hubert Burnham, where ostentatiously cable-hung, dark and light prismatic panels and a stunning Art Deco sunburst entrance were obviously the impeccably modernistic *dernier cri.* (Modernistic, we remind our non-historian readers, is not a synonym for *modern; it specifically identifies* this 1920's-30's style, currently adopted as fashionably high camp.)

The Federal Government had a Busby Berkeley special of three triangular, striped, concave-sided towers rising suavely from a globular base sprouting stepped projections and heroic statues like department store dummies wrapped in carefully folded napkins, theatrically floodlit from below. The whole fair was bathed in brilliantly colored light by Joseph Urban. Raymond Hood and Paul Cret were on the architectural commission.

San Diego in 1935 devoted the 1,400-acre Balboa Park to an orgy of Spanish-Colonial *modernisme* in its California-Pacific Exposition, based on the remaining Bertrand Grosvenor Goodhue buildings of the Panama-California Exposition of 1916. Stylized and imaginary Aztec and Mayan motifs were flattened into friezes and borders and all-over patterns on massed and pyramided structures. The automobile companies added their characteristic white stuccoed facades.

Dallas in 1936 orchestrated a monumental celebration of Texas under six flags, and 60 per cent of the buildings were permanent, to serve as exhibition halls for future state fairs. A contemporary description of its style serves best: "Severe and monumental, interpreted as modern, flavored with the condiments of Egypt and Archaic Greece, and finally seasoned with the warmth and sunshine of the southwest."

Again, this supereclecticism relied on bold, modernistic massing and formal geometry. The entrance was an enormous Lone Star, and the searchlight-striped sky at night over the huge, symmetrical Esplanade of State and its central reflecting pool must have made a stage-set Hollywood couldn't match. Sculpture, in all of the fairs, was universally unsurpassed trivia. Here archaic-visaged maidens with pastry-horn Greek hairdos and smoothly inflated bodies trailed cut-paper draperies over extruded cactus plants and other native flora.

San Francisco in 1939 exploited its Pacifica motif for a kind of orientalized modernistic fantasia on the 400-acre, man-made Treasure Island in the Bay. The high-points were "elephant towers" of stepped, abstract geometry on soaring pyramidal bases and fountain courts where oversize plaster goddesses dangled stars.

The combination of futurism, exotica and streamlined classicism, in various fair formulas, was Everyman's vision of tomorrow. It was the last gasp, in Mr. Lehman's words, of the grand space-making schemes of the Beaux Arts planners and the adolescent excesses of the industrial designer's art.

Apart from its evocative delights, this show is a conscious departure from the approved art-historical way of looking at exposition architecture. Superficially, it is a bow to high camp, an ode to kitsch, and an example of the current fashionable preference for period corn. It breaks with the tradition of Sigfried Giedion, which traces exposition building as a series of dramatic exercises in progressive technology, from the glass and metal of the Crystal Palace to the increasing spans engineered for various Machinery Halls. This led finally to the circuses of tortured experimental techniques in recent years.

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The approach was valid and the structural history it taught was real; it was just hopelessly one-sided. The pictures in the history books are carefully selected for timeless technical details and the taste of the time is just as carefully finessed.

There is now a new and rising art historian's view of the international exposition as a catalyst of taste and style. Its function as a prime cultural indicator has been passed over for real or imagined cosmic significance. It tells about society at a certain moment, which is the role art and history play best.

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And so there is more to the sudden passion for the memorabilia of the recent past than mere nostalgia. Nostalgia is a sadly desperate game, an instinctive gut reaction to the fact that we have gone through, and are still going through, a period of shattering change, a destructive, antiheroic, anti-beautiful phase of smashing beliefs, idols and ideals, in a world that offers none of the certainties and standards that kept earlier generations stable in adversity.

It is a clutching at the symbols of romantically remembered pleasure—we forget the boredom or pain—for those who experienced it, and a kind of cultural role-playing for the young. It is the regret, conscious or visceral, for a simplicity and optimism that can never come again. Art is part of this, and today life and art are complex and anguished, and you can't go home, or to the great World's Fairs, again.