

Architecture: Fair, Fairer, Fairest Fair

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Architecture

Fair, Fairer, Fairest

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WHAT was said, essentially, about the United States exhibition at Expo 67 on this page last week, was that painting is getting some stiff and unconventional competition from other art forms today.

Technology, in science and architecture, has become so much the genuinely innovative, dramatic and beautiful expression of the real needs, commitments and life style of our time, from buildings to spacecraft, that painting has been reduced to a decorative or environmental adjunct to an architectural whole. All the wordy critical obscuran-

tism and inflated prices and egos of the art world will not make it otherwise.

This is why the 10-story Pop Art panels, the moon machines and the movie blowups are all so equally right and wonderful together in the giant "skybreak bubble" that is the U.S. pavilion in Montreal. It is as if Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome—that elegant modern miracle of spatial splendor and structural economy—had been waiting, for the past 20 years, for life and art to catch up with it.

In a sense, it has. In the past, no one quite knew what to do with a geodesic dome,

beyond building one for radar purposes in some remote area of icelandic tundra. You couldn't make "architecture" of it, said the architects. It didn't "go" with anything, said a puzzled public.

In Montreal, at last, everything goes with it: history, art and science. Outside, the steel and plastic bubble glitters like a faceted diamond by day and glows softly at night, a gentle jewel opposite the monumental glass pavilion of the U.S.S.R. Inside, the exhibition occupies a series of vertically stacked platforms joined by escalator and stairs

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within the 20-story high semi-sphere. Structure and contents are united with airy, sophisticated grace.

In form and philosophy, the building and its displays say "today" with wit, profundity, pertinence and charm. The art is in context in this setting. Even yesterday says today, in the way the architects of the exhibition, the Cambridge Seven, have mined the American past for its most telling creative components. They have used everything to create a three-dimensional abstraction of the American spirit, playing objects, shapes and colors knowingly against the structure's soaring space and the geometric patterns of its transparent skin.

The result is a superb demonstration of American culture, now, that makes it clear that this is what 20th-century culture is about, as well.

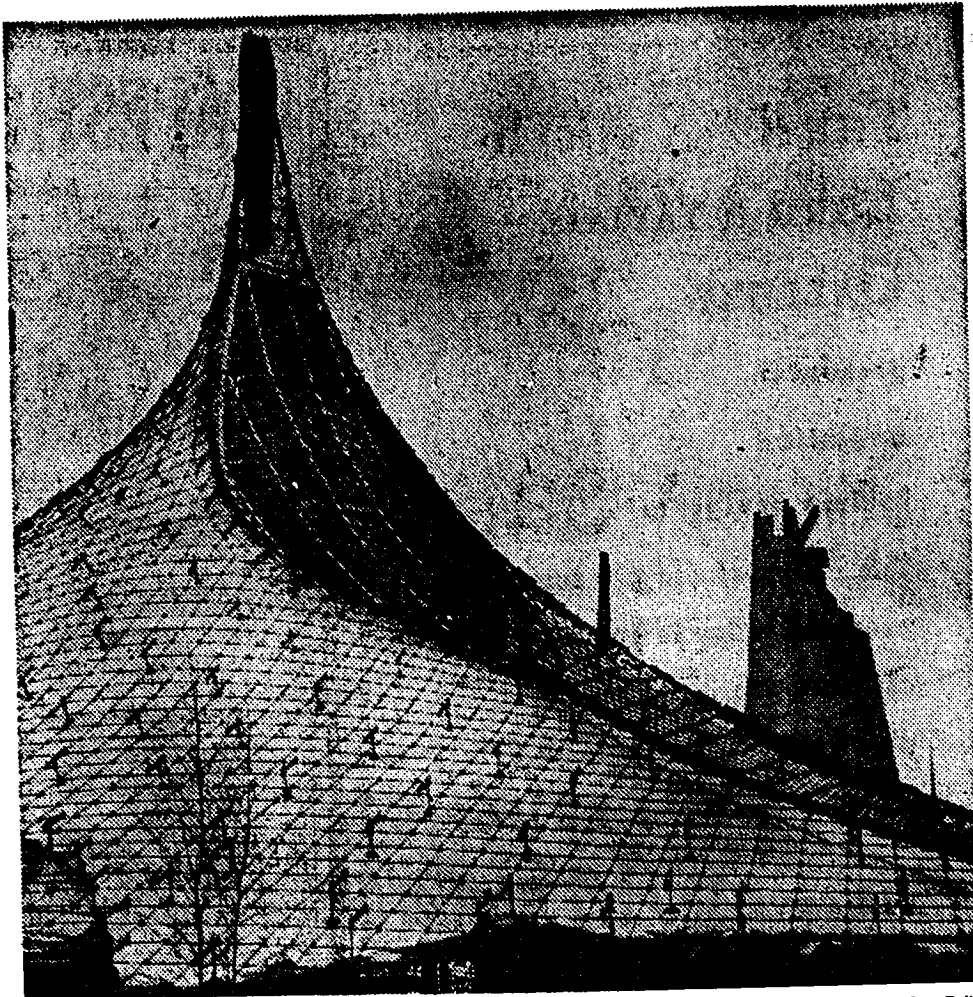
This is also the success of Expo; it says "today," and it says it in terms of what may be our most fully expressive contemporary art, architecture. The result is an exhilarating spectacle, in the tradition of World's Fair as spectacle, with a minimum of fumbles or flops.

This is no accident. Expo's chief architect, Edouard Fiset, and his staff, have directed and controlled the fair's siting and design from the beginning. (It will be remembered that most of the New York Fair's architectural advisors walked out early in protest and never returned.) There are 300 structures at Expo, including 63 national pavilions, on 700 acres, and it takes stamina to sort them out.

Experimental Landmark

There has been no attempt, as some critics point out, to design Expo as the basis of a future planned expansion of Montreal. Only Habitat, the fascinating, problematic, permanent housing experiment put up by Expo and the Canadian Government, of which we have written separately, explores urban design and planning possibilities. It is the real landmark structure of the fair.

To the architect, the International Exposition is traditionally a place to experiment. The list of World's Fairs is a historical catalogue of greater or lesser structural or esthetic triumphs, from the Crystal Palace on. This is the substance and style behind the Little Egypts, the sky-rides and the cotton candy. It is the essence of a great international show, and the public



The New York Times (Sam Falk)

Experiment and Establishment at Expo 67: West Germany's tent, Britain's tower.

"The substance and style behind the skyrides and the cotton candy"

need have no technical awareness to sense it.

Expo's directive to participants laid down specific guidelines. Designers were asked to consider flexible, lightweight structural systems to serve the needs of temporary buildings. Participating nations commissioned their best architects and engineers. Most commercial exhibitors followed their lead and standard.

In contrast and retrospect, the New York fair was marked by dated planning and design squalor. The elaborate sales pitches of major manufacturers, housed in massive, expensive buildings that caricatured architecture, made commercialism the dominant cultural theme. In Montreal, the automobile companies put up the handsome stadium. The fair focuses on the talents and treasures of the national exhibitors.

Expo contains a dazzling array of national treasures, sheltered by an equally dazzling array of the latest structural techniques. Although there is no lack of variety, it is essentially a "space frame" fair. It features the most interesting of the current innovations for enclosing vast areas with efficient, flexible framing systems.

They range from Buckminster Fuller's light, strong, steel tetrahedrons, growing

stronger as they connect in a sphere, to Otto Frei's magnificent, luminous tension tent of steel mesh and plastic for West Germany, and Karl Schwanzer's three-inch thick triangular aluminum sandwich panels in an aluminum frame for Austria's prismatic pavilion. Quebec's canted rectangle of cloud and sky-reflecting glass on a steel truss frame, with an incredibly sophisticated exhibit inside, is one of the single most beautiful buildings in the show. These are a few that offer the stuff of which the future may be made, and fairs have been remarkably clairvoyant.

No Plaster Pickles

Expo's staff and consultants designed everything else: site furniture, street signs, Metro stops, shops and refreshment stands, the gay entertainment kiosks at La Ronde, public spaces and services. A system of pools and waterways is another unifying element. The design level for everything from graphics to plazas is extraordinarily high.

None of this is the jazzy, folded cardboard phoniness dreamed up for effect by short-order display artists equally good at creating giant plaster pickles. The skill and drama of the best buildings are a unity. They have genuine theatrical presence because they are genuine creative acts.

Some are not so genuine. Britain, France and Italy preferred mass and flash. Britain's heavy pomposity and tiresome symbolism are a pretentious bore. France's stylish, spiraling aluminum fins need only paper panties to turn it into a kind of super-chic crown roast. Italy has treated itself to a streamlined two-tone lava cave in which a foolish neobrutalism is ludicrously overdetailed.

Others miscalculated. The tubular space frame of the Netherlands is obviously a wishful exercise for the size of the areas spanned and walls supported. Expo's theme buildings (Man and his World), however they started, have ended with enough structural steel to bridge the English channel.

Czechoslovakia and Switzerland have suave exhibits, to name only two of a substantial list. We suggest one addition to the outstanding fair graphics: a simple directional entrance sign, to eliminate block-long walks around unconventional structures to find the way in.

For the rest, bring feet. And the sense of fun and wonder that has made the best fairs: a combination of high purpose, high style and high romance. It is a fairytale world of palaces and pleasures in a fairytale setting of islands in a river. Get into your pumpkin and go.