

Architecture

Whither World's Fairs?

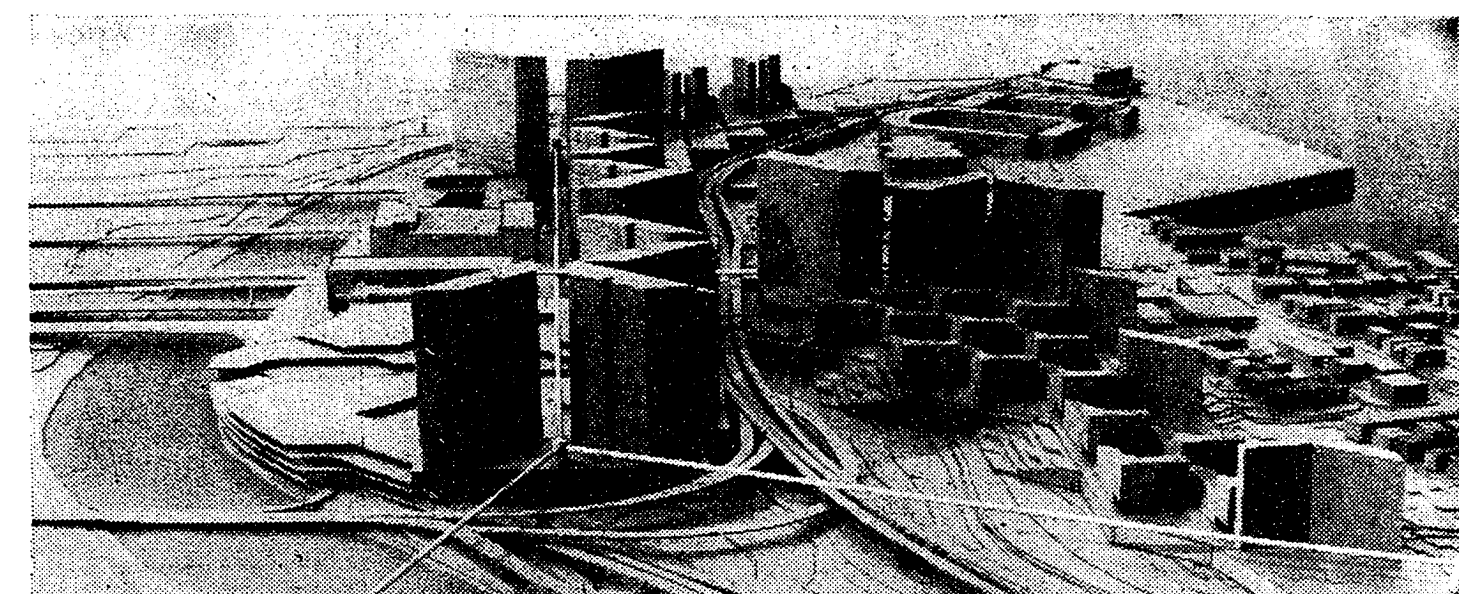
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

BY July 4, the President's Commission on the Bicentennial is to hand in its recommendations on how the 200th anniversary of the founding of this country is to be celebrated. There will be more than fireworks. Some kind of large exposition will probably be mounted. It will be either another super-World's Fair—Expo 76—with International Bureau of Exposition accreditation and a patriotic theme, which would mean, in part at least, the usual temporary extravaganza, or a bicentennial celebration alone, or some combination of the two. It could be conceived to include a permanent contribution to the troubled American scene. With the customary political practice of design and decision by committee, a process known to turn horses into camels, it might even end up to be a bit of all of this.

Although the proposals being considered have not been released by the Government, they are being hotly debated. Spurred by Expo 70 in Osaka, the subject of World's Fairs in general has become a controversial issue in architectural and intellectual circles. Meanwhile, the accepted procedure of behind-the-scenes, chamber-of-commerce jockeying by rival cities with rival plans is proceeding.

Last December, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington made official presentations of their plans in the Capital. Miami has also put in a bid. There are other entries, such as that of an architectural firm, the Cambridge Seven, that calls for a celebration that would stretch down an "eastern corridor" from Boston to Washington, building new mass transit facilities with exhibition stops along the way.

This kind of scheme, emphasizing a permanent contribution to the environment rather than the conventional, temporary World's Fair, has been put forward by at least three separate groups. Proposals and alternatives are being evaluated for the Bi-



Model of air rights construction over 30th Street station from Philadelphia's 1976 Bicentennial plans

Will they come from Boise, Idaho, to look at urban exercises?

centennial Commission by the Department of Commerce now.

It is, of course, terribly late. Almost too late for any major urbanistic scheme. If one counts the average time it takes to pass Federal and local legislation, to get Congress, states and cities to appropriate money, to mobilize participation, to untangle and direct codes and priorities, and the time needed to construct anything even on a modest scale, it becomes quite clear that no environmental proposal can be carried out through government channels in five years. Ten would be more like it.

And then there are those questions of philosophy and conscience. Are gaudy, extravagant, technological displays obsolete? Is a World's Fair-type Bicentennial festival appropriate in a country racked with social, racial and environmental agonies? Should any of the money in such short supply for these urgent priorities be diverted for an exposition, even for a 200th anniversary? Are there ways of celebrating that can also make a positive contribution to the solution of the country's problems? Should we, at this tragically confused and critical stage of our development, be celebrating anything at all?

The one acceptable answer seems to be that only a problem-solving undertaking of some permanent sociological input has anything to recommend it. That is the conventional liberal wisdom and currently approved intellectual stance. It has a lot going for it. But it needs more practical analysis than it is getting if it is to be more than liberal cant, and it requires nothing less for success than the most brilliant

conceptualization and execution.

On the other hand, at government level, where the evaluation is being made by an obviously trade fair-oriented department, this point of view has little currency. The carefully balanced attitude being rehearsed there slips noticeably toward approval of Fairs past. William Nelson, in charge of the project in the Department of Commerce, says that the Government is seeking "imaginative and dynamic" solutions and "new alternatives." But he also asks whether the vacationing couple from Boise, Idaho, will come to look at "urban exercises."

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Interestingly enough, three of the four officially competing cities have not come up with conventional World's Fair plans at all. Boston made a proposal for a structural complex to be built in the harbor that would have remained as a new community. But Boston seems to have knocked itself out of the running because its City Council rejected endorsement of the plan for more urgent urban priorities.

Philadelphia has been laboring for several years, with the most expert planning, architectural and administrative consultants, on a three-site scheme of tremendous urban ambition. About 100 acres of permanent air rights construction, including housing, over the Penn Central 30th Street station, to be used for future commercial, educational and public purposes, would be leased to participating nations for Fair displays. Penn's Landing would provide a landmark setting for historical observances. At the North Philadelphia station area, construction and activities would be "hooked into" the

model cities community for environmental demonstrations during the Bicentennial and permanent needs later. It clearly hooks into Philadelphia's political realities, as well.

Miami, alone, offers a conventional Fair site, on reclaimed land in northern Biscayne Bay, and would like to see it used for an Expo 76. This would be the easiest and most ordinary answer, with a complete lack of historical credentials and not much meaning of any other kind.

What people go to see at Fairs and expositions have always been architectural and entertainment spectacles. If, as John Canaday reports from Osaka, Expo 70 is the Fair to end all Fairs, with the "supermarkets of supertechnology" theme exhausted (which could be a pretty fascinating way to go), what, if anything, is appropriate now?

The International Exposition began in 1851, to promote world trade and craft, manufacturing and cultural exchange (in just about that order), and the Crystal Palace that housed it was a glorious and unforgettable structure. It was not without significance that it contained the seeds of the skyscraper age. World's Fairs are traditionally technological showcases where everyone makes high-wire grabs at symbolism and art, some of which have a lasting effect on the shape of our world. Their excuse for being has always been celebration of one sort or another. That celebration has been glitteringly physical, and at best, the achievement and the excitement have been real. Fairs are testing grounds that chart many of the advances of the arts, with or without sociological application.

Well, times change. The belief that has equated change with progress (particularly at Fairs) included a faith in the susceptibility of all problems to advanced technological solution. We know now that this is not only just one tool in a complex package, but that this vital experimental device has been virtually outlawed for practical purposes by outrageous construction costs.

But should we dismiss the international gathering of talent and resources as irrelevant or a bore? The Bicentennial is clearly a time for national introspection, a measurement of achievement or failure, a re-examination of methods and goals. What can we really do, in the next five years, to mark this stage of our history?

If we believe that the Bicentennial celebration should focus on the improvement of the urban or social condition, it will take a lot more than good intentions. It will need hard thinking about money and time, and the translation of laudable objectives into realistically achievable ends. If we choose this kind of Bicentennial celebration, it must be done with ideological and structural brilliance, or we might as well call it urban renewal and let it go at that.

I, for one, do not believe that celebrations are obsolete, outlawed by the imperfection of man. We need celebrations, whatever our sins. A celebration offers the aspect of beauty, of importance and of hope, no matter how unrealized; the substitution of utility is not enough. On further consideration, what we build should have that aspect anyway, if there is a human condition that can ever be celebrated again, as a Bicentennial, or on a daily basis.