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THE 1984 LOUISIANA WORLD EXPOSITION AND THE WORLD'S FAIR TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

The New Orleans Exposition was an entertainment event not in the tradition of the World's Fairs. It was designed as an elaborate theme park. Problems came from not understanding the nature of the World's Fair audiences and who attend this type of event.

THE 1984 LOUISIANA WORLD EXPOSITION AND THE WORLD'S FAIR TRADITION

INTRODUCTION

Few World's Fairs have been as heavily promoted or as financially unsuccessful as New Orleans' recent entry into the business of sponsoring world class celebrations. The promotional copy on one of the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition's official publications read as follows:

THE GREAT CELEBRATION!

"The World's Fair and New Orleans. It's a magical combination that can only happen once. Join America and other great nations in a celebration the likes of which the world has never seen.

Walk from the French Quarter into a part of China's mysterious past. Stroll through an Italian village. Tip a stein at a German beer garden. Sense firsthand the wonders of Egypt, Japan, Mexico--22 different countries in all.

See every kind of show--from a nonstop jazz and gospel tent to a lavish Broadway-style aquacade. See every kind of entertainer. Taste every kind of food in over 70 restaurants from around the world. See the space shuttle Enterprise.

Its 82-acre setting along the banks of the Mississippi River, will

dazzle the imagination with a wonderland of fact and fantasy.

The world is coming to New Orleans, come see it . at the Fair. Just five minutes from the heart of New Orleans, romantic, alluring, the 'City That Care Forgot.'"

The reality was, of course, quite different than what had been promised by the promotional copy. To paraphrase John Dillinger, who once said of Bonnie and Clyde that they were giving bank robbers a bad name, the unfortunate thing is that the financial problems of the recent New Orleans' World's Fair are just likely to give all World's Fairs a bad name.

CHANGING ROLE OF WORLD'S FAIRS

The history of World's Fairs, especially American World's Fairs, is a grand and eloquent one. Noteworthy American celebrations to which the world was invited and came include, among others, the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, the Chicago Columbia Exposition in 1893, and the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. These and other memorable American World's Fairs brought the world to the doorsteps of our cities so that other peoples might learn of our progress and we of theirs. World's Fairs were the movies, the radio and the television of their times. Today their role is less clear and forceful as ringmaster of the show of shows about progressive developments in civilization. In too many instances World's Fairs today are beginning to resemble what they are not supposed to be--amusement parks. In only a few instances in recent years have they taken seriously their mission to educate their millions of guests about the diversity and marvelousness of our world.

A COMPARISON OF NEW ORLEANS AND KNOXVILLE

From the vantage point of the visitor, the New Orleans World's Fair was certainly better organized than was the Knoxville World's Fair of two years earlier. While Knoxville seemed unprepared for prime time, the New Orleans World's Fair could be criticized for programming errors. Unlike the casualness with which Knoxville's theme of energy was incorporated into its displays, the theme of fresh waters and rivers was effectively carried throughout most of the major exhibits in New Orleans, most notably in the Louisiana Exhibition itself. The result was that the New Orleans World's Fair had a thematic cogency which Knoxville could not even fantasize about after their fair had ended.

PROBLEMS

One of the biggest programming errors at the New Orleans World's Fair was to price the amusement park style rides out of the range of families who are used to paying a single, all-day price at their local,

permanent amusement parks. Another programming error was to not provide more innovative amusements. While the Kid Wash and the Plantation Walk were certainly inventive, they were not sufficient to compensate for the general blandness of other amusements and for the dated feeling of a monorail ride which, however pleasant, was hardly worth traveling to New Orleans to experience. Religious displays were prominently featured in New Orleans in 1984 as they had been in Knoxville in 1982; in both cases, there seemed to be considerable bending of the theme to fit the various religious messages. The Canadian exhibit, however, with its focus on the Vancouver Exposition planned for 1986, carried the theme of fresh water quite naturally throughout its displays. The Chrysler exhibit seemed almost irrelevant, with the walls of its pavilion covered with pictures of classic Chryslers and its centerpiece a film about robots building cars. The United States pavilion with its 3-D film of natural scenes was effective.

The riverside fireworks each night in New Orleans were a delight. In fact, the fireworks display which began nightly at 10:30 PM was better than most Fourth of July displays put on by good sized communities each year.

While I was in New Orleans, it was announced in the media that the World's Fair's management team was embarking on a regional marketing effort to help save the financially troubled fair. That suggested to me that their audience had probably been regional and not really national or international at the outset, only they had not realized it soon enough. The various exhibits suggested more regionalism than internationalism. The Knoxville and New Orleans World's Fairs may have helped to create the impression among too many Americans that World's Fairs are little more than expensive, temporary amusement parks with an occasional "Kid Wash" thrown in for a little variety.

It might well be the case that the organizers of the Knoxville and New Orleans World's Fairs were not of the middle class they had hoped to attract; thus, they might not have understood their real audience. Perhaps for the organizers, family budget issues are not real, personal issues and thus do not enter into their planning for a fair/exposition until the whole operation finds itself in financial difficulty.

CONCLUSION

A trip to the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition might well be described as an outing to an elaborate amusement park with informational and educational exhibits attempting to characterize the landscape. The most lyrical and complete experience of the Exposition was the boat ride inside the Louisiana Exhibition which sampled various Louisiana lifestyles. That boat ride was, for me, suggestive of the overall problem. As far as regional culture was concerned, the Exposition was very successful. But it did not really succeed in bringing the world to New Orleans' doorstep because the Exposition did not capture the world for display, as other classic World's Fairs have done.