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To cite this article: Andrew Smith, John R. Gold & Margaret M. Gold (25 Nov 2025): Exhibitionary urbanism: International Expos and city planning, 1851–2025, Planning Perspectives, DOI: [10.1080/02665433.2025.2574891](https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2025.2574891)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2025.2574891>



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Published online: 25 Nov 2025.



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Exhibitionary urbanism: International Expos and city planning, 1851–2025

International Expositions, World Expos or World's Fairs – hereafter referred to simply as Expos – have helped to invent, develop and disseminate the modernity that has reshaped our world since the mid-nineteenth century, and have contributed to the globalization of economies, cultures, societies and environments.¹ These events are inextricably associated with pioneering inventions and technological progress, but also with empire building and colonial exploitation. According to Geppert,² Expos are best understood as ‘meta-media’ that use various communicative technologies not just to convey the values of participating countries and corporations but also visions of and for the future. Futuristic exhibits, aesthetics and architectures help to explain why commentators such as Gardner³ consider Expos as ‘time machines’ that give the public a taste of, or a glimpse into, the future. The physical manifestation of these futures in the present means these events provide futures ready to be experienced, rather than science fiction or vague fantasies. These ‘time machines’ also have a reverse gear as Expos also function as markers of past times given that they are often staged to commemorate significant anniversaries and to *build* national identities by materializing shared histories and heritages.

The time limited status of Expos has not prevented them from ‘founding traditions and creating legacies in architecture and urban development’.⁴ This special issue of *Planning Perspectives* reaffirms that Expos are also very significant to the history and evolution of urban plans and urban planning. Since 1851, Expos have influenced the development, reconstruction and regeneration of host sites⁵, shaping urban morphologies – especially in global cities that have staged multiple editions such as Barcelona, Chicago, Paris, London, and New York. The word ‘iconic’ is overused in contemporary rhetoric, but Expos have been responsible for some genuine architectural icons. These include both monumental structures such as the Eiffel Tower (Paris 1889), the Atomium (Brussels 1958), the Space Needle (Seattle 1962), but also more subtle icons such as Mies van der Rohe's German Pavilion for the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition. At a wider scale, Expos have been responsible for the development of prestigious cultural districts in central areas of Paris, Vienna and London and regenerated waterfronts in Shanghai, Brisbane and Lisbon. Moreover, there are wider implications of these events for cities across the world, as World Expos have allowed planning ideas and approaches to be tested, showcased and popularized on the global stage. As Camerin and Fernandez Maroto's paper in this volume highlights, planning

¹Roche, *Megaevents and modernity*.

²Geppert, *Fleeting cities*, 3.

³Gardner, *A contemporary archaeology*, 1.

⁴Geppert, *Fleeting cities*, 5.

⁵Gold and Gold, *Cities of culture*; Smith, *Events and urban regeneration*.

cultures have shaped Expos but, equally, Expos have also shaped planning cultures. Their effects have been felt at very different scales, ranging from the development of influential models and communication tools to the conception and realization of comprehensive urban plans. These effects are also not limited to host spaces, with influential ideas, technologies and structures being transposed to places that have never hosted an Expo.

This special issue of *Planning Perspectives* explores the significance of Expos for envisioning, predicting, and shaping the futures of cities. The papers explore the ways that they have affected host cities but also employ Expos as a ‘prism’⁶ through which we can better understand planning approaches, planning cultures and planning histories more generally. This introductory essay provides a conceptual and contextual basis for the papers that follow. We argue that Expos can be usefully understood as [complex] planning exhibitions and as mega-events, and we explore the specific challenges associated with planning post-Expo legacies. We also explain the various ways that Expos operate as agents of urban transformation by outlining the ways they function as exemplars, as experiences, as experiments, and as expropriations.

The exhibitionary complex and complex exhibitions

In the 1980s, Bennett⁷ developed ideas which helped to understand better the way museums were introduced as tools for public instruction, nation-building, and colonialism. His notion of the ‘exhibitionary complex’ is a helpful way of understanding the role of Expos (especially those staged prior to 1929), but Expos are also complex exhibitions. Try explaining what an Expo is to the large number of people who have never heard of them, including many University students, and you will soon realize how difficult it is to define these idiosyncratic, anachronistic and eclectic events. Since 1928 Expos have been regulated by the Paris-based Bureau International des Exhibitions (BIE) and it is no coincidence that the most prominent item to be found their internet homepage is the section ‘What is an Expo?’. Here, the BIE offers little more than to assert that: ‘An Expo is a global event that aims at educating the public, promoting progress and fostering cooperation’.⁸

The confusion surrounding Expos is partly caused by the varied terminology applied to these events, to which we have already referred above. To elaborate further, in the United States, the term ‘World’s Fair’ has always been used to refer to these mega-events, but in other parts of Europe the French word *Exposition* is used interchangeably with the English terms Exhibition, and the German *Weltausstellung*. Even in this special edition, authors use different terms, which highlights the difficulty of imposing the consistent use of terms on to a cross-cultural and constantly changing landscape. The difficulty defining Expos was meant to have been resolved by establishing the BIE in 1928 and via the various conventions it organized subsequently (1972 and 1988) but confusion has continued unabated. The 1928 Paris Convention differentiated ‘General Exhibitions of the 1st category’, for which participants were invited to construct their own pavilions, from ‘General Exhibitions of the 2nd category’, for which participants were not required to build pavilions. In 1988, to provide a more coherent structure, the BIE differentiated ‘registered expositions’ (held every 5 years) from ‘recognised expositions’ (held in between registered Expos). This helped to clear up inconsistencies regarding the scheduling of Expos, but official terminology has since shifted again, since the BIE now refers to these different types of events as World Expos and

⁶Geppert, *Fleeting cities*, 12.

⁷Bennett, *The birth of the museum*.

⁸<https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/expos/about-expos/what-is-an-expo>

Specialised Expos. In the meantime, Expos which operate outside the BIE's remit have proliferated to the extent that it is difficult to differentiate official Expos from other 'global gatherings' that also aim to educate the public, promote progress and foster cooperation.

Given this background, it is perhaps surprising that Expos are still significant entities. Their longevity is remarkable, something that is perhaps best explained by their historical prestige and the entertainments they now provide. Drawing a line between contemporary Expos and the 'Great' Exhibitions of the past gives contemporary events a significance that they would otherwise struggle to acquire. The durability of material legacies from past events has helped to ensure that Expos remain visible. These events remain with us as do their remains. Nevertheless, Expos are locked in a perpetual struggle to prove their contemporary relevance in an era when their *raison d'être* has been undermined by the technological advancement, globalization and the visitor experiences that they helped to promote.

Do we still need physical events that showcase new technologies to the general public? Probably not, but the shift towards fun, entertainment and festivity that happened relatively early in the lifetime of Expos has helped to sustain them. In 1896, Georg Simmel compared these events to medieval orders of knights which 'had lost their practical purpose and continue as sociable gatherings'. He concluded that, as it was impossible to absorb the bewildering array of exhibits, the experience of visiting the Berlin 1896 Exhibition was ultimately best understood as a form of 'amusement'.⁹ The Expos of the twentieth century, continued this tradition to the extent that the things people remembered most about the 1986 Vancouver Expo (World Exposition on Transportation and Communication) were the friendliness of the people, and the excitement and the entertainment.¹⁰ Education was merely the fifteenth most significant theme, mentioned by just 3.5 per cent of the 2216 people who responded to a local newspaper's request in the final week of the Expo for readers to indicate overriding memories. Therefore, whilst the BIE continues to protest that these events are about education, progress and global co-operation, they still exist because people love a festive occasion and because in the contemporary 'experience economy' events remain effective ways of generating economic returns for cities, countries and corporations.¹¹ Yet, as the papers in this special issue also confirm, Expos still exist because of their instrumental value as urban planning tools; they allow host cities to overcome obstacles to development by providing the deadlines, narratives and backing to deliver large-scale urban change.

International Expos as urban exhibitions

Given their strong urban and planning dimensions, one way of understanding Expos is as large scale versions of urban planning exhibitions that 'have long been used as real-world communication tools to raise public awareness of urban planning'.¹² As Blaga¹³ notes, these exhibitions have played a key role as arenas for the exchange, dissemination and legitimization of new planning ideas. In some cases, direct links have been made between [national] city planning exhibitions and World Expos. The German Cities Fair in Dresden (1903) was organized as an alternative to the participation of German urbanists at the 1900 Expo, who felt they did not need the external validation

⁹Rowe, "Georg Simmel and the Berlin Trade Exhibition".

¹⁰Ley and Olds, "Landscape as spectacle".

¹¹Pine and Gilmore, *The experience economy*.

¹²Lu and Lange. "Examining the effectiveness"; Freestone and Amati, *Exhibitions and the development of modern planning culture*.

¹³Blaga, this volume.

or entertainment offered by the Paris event. A century later the Hannover Expo 2000 was conceived as the central node in a wider network of planning and housing exhibitions.¹⁴

Although Expos are much larger and have always performed much wider functions than city planning exhibitions, they display similar characteristics. Knowledge production and cross-disciplinary exchanges – some of the key functions of city planning exhibitions identified by Blaga¹⁵ – are also important outcomes of Expos. Both planning exhibitions and Expos serve as ‘contact zones’ where urbanists, architects and planners gather together to share ideas, and interact with other creative people. In this way, exhibitions can act as ‘field configuring events’,¹⁶ generating knowledge and expanding networks which help innovate planning and related ‘fields’. *International Expos* create ‘global buzz’ and ‘global pipelines’ – feeding ideas into and out of temporary clusters of expertise.¹⁷ These intangible effects are some of the lesser explored planning legacies of staging Expos.

Like smaller exhibitions, Expos can also act as ‘teaching tools’ to help the public and professionals understand key ideas.¹⁸ Notable exhibits have included innovative maps, interactive diagrams and three-dimensional models of cities, and these visual tools have been traditionally used in planning exhibitions to communicate complex ideas to international audiences. Perhaps the most famous planning models exhibited were those that were constructed for the 1939/40 and 1964/5 World’s Fairs in New York. Both were instrumental in communicating the planning approaches advocated by Robert Moses (1888–1981), the controversial ‘power broker’ who shaped New York’s built environment in the twentieth century.¹⁹ The Futurama exhibit designed by Norman Bel Geddes for the 1939/40 World’s fair allowed visitors to fly over a futuristic world where freeways dominated the landscape. A key feature of the 1964/5 New York World’s Fair was the Panorama of the City of New York designed by Raymond Lester who had worked with Bel Geddes on the 1939/40 Fair. Here, urban plans and innovative approaches to city planning were not merely an influence on or outcome of Expo events, they were one of the main attractions.²⁰ These events have also facilitated the production of model cities at a large-scale. Rather than merely featuring scaled down representations of cities, innovative structures and urban districts can actually be constructed. In this respect, Expos are the ultimate city planning exhibition: one where full-size replicas of vernacular buildings can be experienced as with the Poble Espanyol built for the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition, or futuristic urban designs are realized such as the megastructures constructed for Expos in 1967 and 1970 (see below).

International Expos as mega-events

International Expos are often treated as commensurate with the world’s biggest sport events and amalgamated into the growing literature on mega-events. Smith defines a mega-event as one that sells more than a million tickets and using this blunt measure every Expo since 1851 qualifies for ‘mega’ status.²¹ Regarding Expos as commensurate with events like the Olympic Games recognizes some of their most potent characteristics as urban planning tools: for example, the strict

¹⁴Lu and Lange, “Examining the effectiveness”.

¹⁵Blaga, this volume.

¹⁶Lampel and Meyer, “Field-configuring events as structuring mechanisms”, 1025.

¹⁷Bathelt and Schuldt, “International trade fairs and global buzz”; Bathelt et al., “Clusters and knowledge”.

¹⁸Monclus and Medina-Diez, this volume.

¹⁹Caro, *The Power Broker*.

²⁰Gold, “Exposition and imagination”.

²¹Smith, *Events and urban regeneration*.

deadline for project completion; the provision of a window of opportunity to realize wider urban changes; and the political will and degree of popular support generated when infrastructure upgrades are tied into an event project. Like Olympic projects, Expo planning benefits from publicity, meanings and narratives generated by event associations. However, as with the Olympic Games, these meanings and narratives are difficult to control particularly in the build-up to events. Negative coverage of construction delays, cost overruns, and the treatment of workers always threatens to override intended messaging. As with other mega-events, media coverage and public opinion tend to follow a recurring pattern over the lifetime of an event. Initial positivity is followed by negative coverage of project complexities in the build-up, but once the event gets underway, more favourable attitudes tend to return and persist.

There are not just similarities, but also intersections, between Expos and other mega-event projects. In the early days of the modern Olympics, the Games and Expos were held jointly and simultaneously in the same city in the cases of Paris 1900 and St. Louis 1904, an exercise essentially repeated when London ran the Olympics and the large-scale Franco-British Exhibition in parallel in 1908. These events became geographically distinct when the size and status of the Olympic Games grew from 1912 onwards, but there are multiple examples of Expo sites that have subsequently been used as Olympic venues. Wembley Stadium, for example, was constructed as part of the British Empire Exhibition in 1924/5 and subsequently acted as the main Olympic stadium in 1948. Later, in its rebuilt state, it hosted the men's and women's Olympic football competitions, including both finals, in 2012. The sites developed for the Rome Expos of the 1940s, cancelled after the outbreak of the Second World War II, were used for the 1960 Olympics. There are also several instances where host cities were inspired to host the Olympic Games because of the previous success of an Expo. After staging one of the most widely acclaimed Expos of the twentieth century in 1967, Jean Drapeau's mayoral regime in Montreal successfully bid to stage the 1976 Olympics.²² Similarly, Barcelona's 1992 Games aimed to emulate the perceived success of the city's Expos in 1888 and 1929.²³ During a period of resurgent Catalan identity in the 1980s, when Catalunya was seeking to capitalize on its newly gained autonomy and implement long intended plans for its capital, bidding for the 1992 Olympic Games seemed the natural thing to do.

Despite the consolidated treatment of Expos and the Olympic Games in much of the literature on mega-events, it is important to recognize the core differences between Expos and other mega-events, especially those that help to explain some of the unique challenges that Expo projects tend to face. Although requirements have evolved and now differ between different types of Expos, they are co-produced by participating nations who are invited to construct or design pavilions that will be located within one large showground in the host city. This tends to produce an eclectic mix of buildings which are ill-suited to the principle of 'legacy planning' that has become an important element in Expo projects, just as it has for Olympic hosts. The latter often struggle to identify legacy uses for large-scale sports facilities but for Expo structures it is not just difficult to identify post-event uses; it is sometimes also difficult to identify what these structures should be used for during the event! Whilst this adds complexity, there are advantages – it makes these venues inherently more flexible and there is more scope for designing structures that can be more easily converted post-event.

More obvious differences between World Expos and other mega-events include their timing and duration. Before 1972, Expos were scheduled in a rather *ad hoc* fashion: there were sometimes

²²Gold, "Exposition and imagination".

²³Camarin and Fernandex Maroto, this volume.

multiple Expos staged in one calendar year, and no standardized gap between registered events. The 1972 BIE Convention stipulated that Expos should be staged every ten years which explains the relative lack of officially registered events in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A subsequent agreement in 1988 established contemporary scheduling protocols: since the 1988 Convention was implemented, World Expos have been staged every 5 years with Specialized Expos held between larger editions. This hosting framework is similar to the way the comparatively smaller winter edition of the Olympic Games is now held between editions of the larger summer Games. However, whilst the Olympic Games only lasts for 16 days (albeit with the additional 11 days of competition for the Paralympic Games), the hosting period is much longer for Expos – currently, three months for Specialised Expos or six for International Registered Exhibitions. Having an extended time frame allows more people to experience the event but Expo hosts tend to find it harder to attract and sustain interest, engagement and media coverage given that there are not the same points of peak interest. This has associated implications in terms of funding – it is harder to generate income from sponsorship and media rights, so there is more pressure to sell tickets and a greater obligation to fund event projects through land sales and government grants. These different funding arrangements also mean that the BIE is a much less influential ‘rights holder’ than the IOC or FIFA which use their financial and bargaining power to exert significant influence over host cities. Some of the most celebrated Expos were not actually sanctioned by the BIE, and the partial and fluctuating membership of this organization also hinders its global reach. For instance, even though they staged two of the most widely acclaimed events, Australia and Canada are no longer members. The US joined the BIE belatedly in 1968 but then withdrew in 2001 only to rejoin in 2017.

Planning Expo legacies

One other, subtler difference between Olympic urbanism and the urban planning projects produced by Expos is the relative lack of ‘benchmark’ Expo cases from which legacy planning lessons can be learned and re-applied. Partly because of robust planning, but also because of hard selling, the Barcelona 1992 Olympics has become known worldwide as an exemplar case for cities wanting to use mega-events as ways of realizing ambitious urban plans. Many World Expos have earned positive reputations, and longlasting legacies, but few are regarded as ones that should be emulated by contemporary hosts. Expo ‘98 in Lisbon is perhaps the exception.²⁴ If the key planning lesson from Barcelona ‘92 was that mega-events work best when they are used to help achieve wider plans for a city, then the key learning from Lisbon ‘98 was that Expos will only leave coherent urban legacies if the creation of a new district is prioritized over the event itself in the overall design of the masterplan. This means working backwards from the urban district that developers want to create and working out how an Expo might fit into this plan and assist its realization. The logic of this approach seems clear – and has been adopted by subsequent hosts such as Shanghai’s Expo 2010 – but it is surprisingly difficult to implement. As the event draws closer, politicians, participants and organizers tend to become obsessed with staging a successful Expo at the expense of providing the foundation for a sustainable urban district.

It is unlikely that the Lisbon model will ever become as familiar as the Barcelona model, but the wider appreciation and emulation of this approach would result in more coherent event legacies. A traditional obstacle to prioritizing this approach stems from the stipulations made by the BIE

²⁴Aelbrecht, “A world fair for the future”.

regarding how – and by whom – pavilions are constructed. The success of Lisbon 98 substantially arose from being the first Expo staged under the new BIE protocols, which stipulated that the organizing city was responsible for designing the whole Expo site.

The Lisbon model suits Specialized Expos because the hosts construct the pavilions which are then occupied by participants. In the case of World Expos (previously known as General Exhibitions of the 1st order, now officially known as Internationally Registered Exhibitions), participants from across the globe tend to design and construct their own pavilions. Historically, this has led to eclectic portfolios of buildings which were difficult to integrate into the urban fabric post-event. Gutheim²⁵ noted that the BIE obliged New York to provide each of the participating nations in the 1939 Expo with 10,000 square feet of exhibition space. The result, according to Monclus and Diez-Medina,²⁶ was a visually chaotic set of pavilions, rather than a ‘harmonious urban environment’. They noted that a similar problem characterized the Brussels Expo (1958), which also privileged pavilions over planning, creating objects in a landscape rather than coherent urban design. One of the key reasons that Expo projects tend to fall short in their efforts to deliver a coherent urban district is pressure to put more emphasis on individual buildings, especially national pavilions, which compromise the overall design. The organizers of Montreal’s Expo ‘67 formulated an ambitious plan to deal with this problem by having more themed pavilions, but even these intentions were undermined by pressure to prioritize national pavilions. In the current era, this is perhaps becoming less of a problem as the BIE’s stipulations have become more flexible, allowing Expo hosts to exert more control over the layout and construction of the event site.

In contemporary Expos there tends to be a set of key permanent buildings that provide the spine of the main site, including the pavilions of the host country plus several general pavilions dedicated to the themes of the event. These are then supplemented by temporary structures allocated to or designed by participating nations which are dismantled or relocated post-event. The tradition for constructing temporary pavilions at World Expos also means these projects also need to be understood via growing interest in the temporary city and temporary urbanism.²⁷ Planners now realize that temporary uses and temporary structures are not merely transient or ephemeral phenomena; they can highlight potentialities, generate long lasting effects and provide the basis for more permanent urbanism. Whilst contributing to growing interest in temporary urbanism, Expos can now benefit from better understanding about how temporary uses can provide the basis for more permanent changes.

The historic tendency for Expo pavilions to be relocated to other places post-event links to recent interest in modular and mobile architectures. The hosts of Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups have only recently begun exploring the potential to move event structures to other cities, but this is an established Expo practice. The relocation of structures means that World Expos have had material effects on places that have never, and could never, stage an Expo of their own. The life cycle of the Danish Pavilion from the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle is instructive in this respect. Comprising a reconstruction of a half-timbered house originally built in Horsens (Jutland) in 1718, it was one of eight pavilions constructed on the banks of the Seine. Lady Elizabeth Lewis, a visitor to the show and wife of the eminent London lawyer Sir George Lewis, persuaded her wealthy husband to purchase and reconstruct it at Overstrand, then emerging

²⁵“Federal participation in two World’s Fairs.”

²⁶Monclus and Diez-Medina, this volume.

²⁷Bishop and Williams, *The Temporary City*.

as a fashionable retreat on England's North Norfolk coast. The process by which a traditional Danish house was successively transported to a Parisian Exposition and an East Anglian coastal village suitably illustrates the transnational, mobile architectures that Expos can create.

Expos have been increasingly staged to accelerate the development or regeneration of a specific host location, with the BIE now requiring host cities to submit 'development and post-use plans for the Expo site' as part of the bidding process. Minner *et al.*²⁸ provide a useful summary of the different ways in which Expos have influenced the locations in which they are staged and the legacies that they bequeath. Their typology identifies five types of physical legacies, not only providing examples of each but indications as to which constitute examples of 'best practice'. This encompasses downtown urban renewal (e.g. Seattle 1962), post-industrial waterfront transformation (Brisbane 1988), the creation of suburban recreational parks (New York 1964/5), the development of science and innovation hubs (Seville 1992), and new urban extensions (Shanghai 2010). Admittedly there appears to be some overlap here, for example, between urban extensions and waterfront transformations. The framework also perhaps overlooks the rather circuitous, inefficient and opportunistic ways in which these legacies were achieved. Nevertheless, this is an instructive framework that summarizes not only how Expo sites tend to be used in the post-event era, but also how they might be incorporated within wider urban plans. It can be usefully supplemented by providing a conceptual framework within which subtler planning effects can be understood. Unlike the framework supplied by Minner and her colleagues, these effects apply to a range of locations – not just in host cities, but also in remote locations. For the purposes of providing a clear and memorable conceptualization, these are organized into four alliterative sections.

Exemplars

Perhaps the most obvious way that Expos have influenced urban planning is by promoting planning models that have subsequently been adopted in other contexts. These are wider philosophies, aesthetic movements, and planning principles that are not merely featured at Expos but used as organizing principles. Unlike more experimental designs, these planning approaches are generally developed independently of the event, with Expos used to showcase, popularize and disseminate them. As has been outlined above, site design is sometimes compromised by allowing nations to construct their own pavilions, but there are still many examples where this obstacle has been overcome and exemplary sites that exhibit a coherent planning approach have been produced.

Exemplars of city planning include the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago which launched and showcased the City Beautiful movement. Under Daniel Burnham's leadership, the White City was constructed to stage one of the most significant Expos ever seen, with magnificent buildings located at the end of long diagonal axes that created monumental vistas. Given that it was based on Beaux-Arts and neoclassical principles, the architecture was not experimental, but it was highly influential, shaping Burnham's 1909 Plan for Chicago and MacMillan's 1902 Plan for Washington DC.²⁹

Later Expos were similarly influential in showcasing emerging approaches to urban planning that aimed to create a sense of optimism after the Great Depression of the 1930s. The 1939/40

²⁸Minner *et al.* "Global city patterns in the wake of World Expos".

²⁹Peterson, *The birth of city planning in the United States*.

New York Expo, featured in several papers in this volume, showcased the rise of the car-oriented city and allowed visitors to experience cityscapes designed around transit. After the Second World, the 1951 Festival of Britain site demonstrated Gordon Cullen's Townscape principles. The South Bank was deliberately planned to frame views of the North Bank of the Thames, emphasizing that plans should take into account locations outside the boundary of the planned district.³⁰

Experiments

While Expos are essentially brief cities that, at least in principle, are ideologically directed towards finding solutions to global challenges, there is also scope to use them as experimental sites at which to test new ideas. That approach was advocated by Shulruff and Wyman³¹ who have suggested that Expos can act as laboratories, 'creating, articulating and deliberating urban futures' by supplying experimental immersive, interactive and relational settings for the visitor to experience. More generally, they also supported Yorick Blumenfeld's observation that: 'Studying our possible futures can not only enhance our ability to understand what is happening in a wider historical context but can also imbue our consequent acts with a greater awareness and a feeling of participation.'³²

Two notable Expo-experiments, for example, gave physical expression to 1960s thinking about radical alternatives to conventional built forms and urbanism. The first, Montreal's Expo '67, was 'designed to be the broadest possible demonstration of the emotional and political potential of aesthetics to influence a population'.³³ It included Moshe Safdie's Habitat '67, a design for a prefabricated estate of apartments that sought to avoid the constraints of the dour rectangular boxes normally associated with such structures. Instead, Safdie designed the installation around a mega-structure of A-frames to which industrially produced modular units were clipped. This created a stacked three-dimensional structure that maximized the external exposure of the dwellings – each of which looked out in three or four directions – giving each individual unit a clearer identity. Habitat 67 provided a popular spectacle during the Expo and still survives as an apartment complex, but only a small proportion of the original design was ever built. As such, it failed to achieve its commercial objectives of demonstrating the cost advantages of prefabrication and indeed it could not have been built economically in the first place without the written-off subsidy from the Exposition Corporation.

The second example of Expo-experimentation occurred at Osaka in 1970, which was the first Expo to be held in a developing nation – as Japan was then regarded. Like its Canadian predecessor, Expo 70 was a laboratory for experimental megastructuralism. The key influence came from the Metabolist movement, a Japanese school of utopian thought that looked to technology and industrialization to solve urban problems.³⁴ Metabolists primarily crafted visionary plans intended to show the potential of amphibious or tower cities constructed by advanced technology and embracing flexibility and impermanence, but at Expo 70 were given the opportunity to give tangible expression to their ideas in the design of the fairground and its pavilions.³⁵ Led by Kenzō Tange, who masterplanned the entire showground, Expo 70 embodied the Metabolist philosophy of growth and change, offering a holistic, if controversial, vision of built structures as adaptable,

³⁰Monclus and Diez-Medina, this volume.

³¹Shulruff and Wyman, "A Trip Through Tomorrowland", 23.

³²Blumenfeld, "Introduction", 7.

³³Knoblauch, "The new Brutalism", 369.

³⁴Schalk, "The architecture of utopia"; Tamari, "Metabolism".

³⁵Cho, "Expo 70".

living organisms. While many contemporary observers³⁶ were intrigued by the architectural spectacle, others criticized the depoliticized nature of the approach and the disconnect between the technologically utopian ideals and the real-world urban problems it claimed to address. With hindsight, the end product now seems more like an epitaph to experimental megastructures than a serious essay in practical urbanism.

Experiences

A more subtle way that Expos have influenced urban planning is by giving the public direct experiences of temporary districts that exposed them different ways of urban living. In analyzing the planning legacies of Expos, we sometimes forget to analyze the legacies of direct event experiences, which include revised expectations of the built environment. Expo urbanism is associated with a top-down approach to urban development, but urban regeneration trajectories can also be shaped by the demands of citizens who attend Expo events. Although legacies are shaped by planners, architects, and urban designers, the general public can also exert an influence especially in instances when Expo environments enthrall the onlookers. Walt Disney was famously inspired by his visits to the 1939-40 New York World's Fair, which not only became a template used for Disney's parks but also for other theme parks and attractions. According to Cull, the most celebrated Expos are those that "reminded visitors of the possibility inherent in humanity and have brought visions of a better life".³⁷ Highlighting possibilities and raising expectations can encourage planners to retain elements of Expo sites that were appreciated by the public, even if that was not the original intention. This is neatly expressed in Houdart's commentary on the 2010 Shanghai World Expo which was entitled *Better City, Better Life*: "The Expo won't last, but in the Expo one can find embryonic pieces of a Shanghai to come".³⁸

Perhaps the best example of Expo-related experiences that led to a significant planning legacy is Expo 88 which was staged on a waterfront site beside the Brisbane River. Post-event, the Expo site was converted into South Bank Parklands – a 42-hectare public park which is now Brisbane's most popular leisure space. These Parklands were not created directly by the Expo but were inspired by the spirit of conviviality and festivity that people had enjoyed during the event.³⁹ Therefore, Expo 88 generated a physical legacy not merely via its direct footprint, but via the behaviours, emotions and expectations it engendered. Reflecting the theme – "Leisure in an Age of Technology" – Expo 88 opened people's eyes to the leisure opportunities available in their own city and redefined Brisbane as a centre of cultural consumption. Attending Expo '88 heightened citizens' expectations of urban space and encouraged those responsible for repurposing the Expo site to pursue different trajectories than those intended in initial legacy plans.⁴⁰

Expropriations

One of the most controversial aspects of Expo urbanism is the expropriation of land and property that are required to assemble sites large enough to host these mega-events. The controversial site acquisition is not merely an incidental byproduct of staging Expos; assembling real estate into a

³⁶Ichirō, "Expo '70 as the Ruins of Culture".

³⁷Cull, "Soft power's next steppe", 272.

³⁸Houdart, "A city without citizens", 130.

³⁹Smith and Mair, "The making of a city".

⁴⁰Smith and Mair, "Celebrate '88".

large coherent venue devoid of residents and businesses is an outcome that Expo hosts actively seek. Expos, unlike the Olympic Games, are staged at one location, and as most cities will not have a large enough site under single ownership, expropriations are inevitable. Acknowledging these as a key part of the history of Expo urbanism helps to avoid the ‘amnesia’ that tends to accompany the more celebrated Expo projects.⁴¹ Expos are seldom built on vacant sites. They are usually constructed on land where people live and work; not merely spaces, but places where communities and collective memories are forged. Vague urban futures showcased at Expos are often realized at the expense of meaningful urban pasts.

Some examples of Expo-linked expropriations are relatively well known, such as those that occurred in Shanghai in advance of the 2010 International Expo, where 18,000 households living by the shores of the Huangpu River were relocated.⁴² Comparable displacements of residents and businesses to stage Expos have also occurred in Australian, European and American cities. Areas surrounding Expo sites also experience displacements, with Expos used as an excuse to gentrify districts that do not fit the image that host cities are trying to portray. Bryson⁴³ provided an insightful example in his analysis of the 1974 Expo that was staged in a substantial 50-acre site in Spokane’s Riverfront Park in Washington state, USA. Spokane was ‘cleaned, greened and environmentally themed’ for its time in the spotlight, but the sanitization of the city also extended to the areas around the regenerated park. Thousands of low rent apartments in an adjacent district were closed or demolished during the build up to the Expo. As such, the removal of low-cost housing disproportionately affected non-white residents, suggesting that the greening of the city was a less significant outcome of Expo 74 than the production of a revanchist city.

International Expos: the literature

International Expos have featured notably in works of fiction.⁴⁴ In her 1935 novel *Light from Arcturus*, for example, Mildred Walker used the 1976 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and the Chicago World’s Fairs of 1893 and 1933 as milestones in the main character’s efforts to escape the limitations of life as a Nebraskan housewife.⁴⁵ In a similar vein, Lauren Belfer set her story of power and intrigue in American politics against the backdrop of the city of Buffalo hosting the 1901 Pan-American Exposition. Here spectacle becomes metaphor, where all seemed fixed yet was illusion:

“We glided beneath carved bridges decorated with classical sculpture; we passed hanging gardens and miniature waterfalls. The exposition’s extravagant Spanish Renaissance architecture surrounded us in a riot of colours, from red to warm ivory. ... Was it beautiful, this city of the imagination brought to life? From here on the gondola it was. From here it seemed eternal; there was no sense that it was merely a plaster stage set that in six months would be bulldozed back to farmland.”⁴⁶

Eduardo Mendoza’s *La Ciudad de Los Prodigios* [‘City of Marvels’] has its central character, Onofre Bouvila, moving to Barcelona with ‘the city ... in a frenzy of renewal’ as it prepared to stage the 1888 International Exhibition.⁴⁷ No other book, whether fiction or nonfiction, has better captured

⁴¹Abbott and Minner, “The art of resisting”.

⁴²Lu and Hu, this volume.

⁴³Bryson, “Greening urban renewal”, 503.

⁴⁴See Robertson, “Cultural Hegemony” Murphy, Joseph Claude. *Exposing the modern; Böger, Envisioning the nation*.

⁴⁵Walker, *Light from Arcturus*.

⁴⁶Belfer, *City of Light*, 317-318.

⁴⁷Mendoza, *La Ciudad*; also Wells, “The City of Words”.

the murky world of real estate speculation associated with World Expos, including the plight of construction workers:

They lived in shacks made of planks of wood and cardboard on the beach that extended from the World's Fair landing stage to the gasworks. Hundreds of women and children swarmed around this camp that had sprung up in the shadow of scaffolding and frameworks of what were soon to be palaces and pavilions.

Some would argue that, almost from the beginnings of the genre, novelists have used the Expo's connection with promotion of technology and change to critique modernity. For example, according to Anne Green, Flaubert's classic novel *Madame Bovary*, published in 1856 contains a thinly disguised critique of the 1855 Paris Exposition Universelle.⁴⁸ This is achieved via depictions of an analogous event – an Agricultural Fair – and the inclusion of pompous speeches that eulogise the new vision of France that was emerging at this time. After one official's overblown rhetoric that “Everywhere trade and the arts flourish . . . Confidence returns. At last, France breathes again”, a cynic's response is “Doesn't this conspiracy of a society revolt you?” Green argues this dialogue reflects Flaubert's disdain for Expos and the values they communicated.

When analyzing nonfictional literatures on Expos, it is difficult to reach definitive conclusions as to whether they have received too little attention or whether they have been over-analyzed. In histories of modernity, cultural sociologies of empire and in socio-political analyses of national identity they are certainly given prominent attention. Expos are also well covered in the literatures on architecture and design thanks to the pioneering structures they have bequeathed. Nevertheless, the planning of Expos or, reciprocally, their contribution to planning, are underexplored in existing texts, especially when comparing the modest volume of published research on Expo urbanism with the vast literature on Olympic cities.

To elaborate, while there have been excellent accounts of specific Expos, more comparative accounts that cover multiple editions over a significant period of time remain relatively rare. Two key texts written in the 1980s provided a good foundation for the wider understanding of Expos. The pioneering insights of Robert Rydell's book *All the World's a Fair*, published in 1980,⁴⁹ were complemented at the end of the decade by Greenhalgh's *Ephemeral Vistas*. These comprehensive analyses have been supplemented in more recent years by books which focus more specifically on the urban planning and urban regeneration dimensions of Expos. For example, Mattie⁵⁰ provided brief descriptions and pictorial coverage of all major World's Fairs from 1851-2000, along with plans, but essentially only supplies a scrapbook of images. Gold and Gold⁵¹ included an extended section on International Expos, with case studies ranging over more than a century from the Great Exhibition (1851), via New York's World's Fair (1939-40) to Montreal's Expo 67 (1967). Similarly, in his book on Zaragoza's 2008 Expo, Monclús⁵² presented three introductory chapters that provide a chronology of Expos based on their urban impacts: from the historic Expos (1851-1929), through those of the modern (1930-1990) and postmodern (post-1990) eras. Maurice Roche addressed Expos alongside the Olympic Games in an attempt to understand the role of these events in developing global culture and global citizenship.⁵³ Other multi-edition texts that cover a slightly more constrained period include

⁴⁸Green “France Exposed”, 923.

⁴⁹Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*.

⁵⁰Mattie, *World's Fairs*.

⁵¹Gold and Gold, *Cities of Culture*.

⁵²Monclús, *International exhibitions*.

⁵³Roche, *Mega-Events and Modernity*.

Geppert's analysis of European 'Imperial' Expos from 1896 to 1931.⁵⁴ This is notable for the way it provides insights into the ways modernity was created, displayed, consumed and disputed via events that were transitory yet recurrent.

This recurrence, and the strong similarities between editions, are prominent in Geppert's call for more comparative, multi-edition analyses of Expos. The number of texts using this approach has grown in recent years, but the editions featured tend to be ones which are already well covered: those held in London, Paris and New York, and the iconic events staged in Montreal (1967), Osaka (1970) and Shanghai (2010). This tends to privilege World Expos (over Specialized Expos) and those staged in Western nations (over Eastern nations). For example, relatively little ever appeared in the West concerning Expos held in Korea, which have included two BIE-recognized Expositions at Daejeon in 1993 and Yeosu in 2012, along with significant, smaller-scale exhibitions such as the Chōsen Exhibition in 1929. Much the same can be said of Expos staged in emerging nations in Central Asia (Antalya 2016, Astana 2017), and Eastern Europe (Belgrade, 2027).

Themes and contents

The nine papers which follow are concerned with historical themes arising from the relationship between International Expos and the cities that have staged them. Like the papers to be found in the companion special issue on 'Olympic urbanism' published in this journal in 2024,⁵⁵ the essays here deal with topics ranging from the initial visions that inspired the physical planning of these megaevents through to the strategies and practices that have guided their post-event legacies.

The opening three papers embrace a longitudinal view. Lisa Schrenk provides a historically and geographically wide-ranging review that explores the complex relationship between transience and permanence in the post-event fate of Expo fairgrounds. Although ablaze with colour and pulsating with life during the event, many fairgrounds remain underutilized and marginal thereafter, sometimes with the lingering remains of pavilions that had no obvious further use persisting for many years. In this context, attention is drawn to the mixed experiences of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Expositions. While the showgrounds for the Expos of 2017 and 2020 are cited as examples of successful legacy development, the sad post-event realities of other Expos belie the themes of urban sustainability so often touted as a key part of the rationale for the event itself.

The ensuing paper by Javier Monclús and Carmen Díez-Medina focuses on an important but neglected dimension of site planning for Expos, namely, the provision of public open spaces. Such spaces are recognizably important in visitor experience by virtue of managing flows and facilitating patterns of social interaction, but their lasting impact on urban design and planning has seldom been explored. Their paper breaks new ground by systematically categorizing the changes in provision that have occurred from the earliest festivals like London's 1851 Great Exhibition, to more recent events, where attention has firmly focused on the design and integration of open spaces. They show, with supporting case studies, how provision has reflected broader ideas in open space design from Beaux-Arts and City Beautiful to modernism and contemporary environmentalism. Like Schrenk, they point to the importance of post-event planning in deciding the legacy outcomes resulting from Expos.

For their part, Federico Camerin and Miguel Fernández Maroto also adopt a longitudinal perspective, but their comparative survey centres upon Spain and, in particular, three full Expos and

⁵⁴Geppert, *Fleeting cities*.

⁵⁵See this journal, volume 39.3 (June 2024): 487-719.

four other large-scale exhibitions held between 1888 and 2008 in Barcelona, Seville and Zaragoza. Their case studies again show how the planning of Expos has been porous over time to wider currents of thinking about urban development. Earlier events (1888–1929) saw Expos being primarily fitted into existing plans for urban beautification and modernization rather than acting as catalysts for new development in their own right. By contrast, the more recent Expos (from 1992 onwards) clearly show a switch in favour of the project-based approaches that typified the new climate of ideas associated with neoliberal urbanism and globalization. Here, there was much greater intention to influence spatial planning (as with Seville 1992 and Zaragoza 2008) and to implement strategic visions (Barcelona 2004). Common to both periods, however, were tendencies towards oversized infrastructures, significant cost overruns and challenges for post-event legacy.

Salomé Honório, Annarita Gori and Simone Tulumello shift the discussion to Spain's Iberian neighbour and note the tenacious grip that the social memory of Portugal's maritime past, with its associated resonances of expansionism and colonization, exercised upon the design and legacy of Expo events. They compare two events held in Lisbon in 1940 and 1998 respectively. The first, the Exhibition of the Portuguese World, was a relatively straightforward expression of imperial bombast, appropriating key themes from the so-called 'Age of Discovery' in order to communicate the regime's chosen construction of identity. The second, Expo 98, was explicitly designed from the outset as a vehicle for regenerating Lisbon's east waterfront (Parque das Nações). Yet despite this objective and the apparent sea change of thinking in a postcolonial world, reworkings of the colonial narratives can be seen in the subsequent development strategy for Expo 98. This point is illustrated by the naming and framing of the new Vasco da Gama and Colombo shopping centres, where strong echoes of the neocolonialist ideology is effectively normalized into contemporary urban life.

The historic connection between Expos and town planning is not confined to questions of site planning and urban legacy. At a formative stage in the development of town planning, expositions were specifically arranged in order to campaign for the need for town planning and to communicate ideas about planning strategies to a wider public. In the next paper, Andreea Blaga notes how early twentieth century expositions such as the Städtebau Exhibitions in Dresden (1903) and Berlin (1910), and the London Town Planning Conference (1910) effectively became media for the circulation of planning ideas. The resulting patterns of communication, however, were not simply one-way. Using Sweden as an example, she shows that while Swedish delegates absorbed international models, they also had the opportunity to present their own domestic practices to the wider world. In particular, her case study illustrates how one such delegate, the architect Per Hallman, corresponded widely with key figures that he had encountered through city planning expositions and discusses the two-way exchanges of ideas that occurred. In doing so, Blaga makes a case for affording Sweden a more central place in knowledge exchange than is commonly appreciated.

The eminence of Paris in the early history of expositions is emphasized by Ulf Strohmeier in his exploration of Paris's 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne as a civic and urban event. Set against the political and architectural tensions of the late-interwar years, he argues that the Expo not only acted as a forum for France to assert its cultural leadership and democratic values amid the rising tide of European authoritarianism, but was also seen as a way to reimagine Paris's urban landscape. Attention is drawn to related developments around the Trocadéro and Champ de Mars – the traditional heart of Parisian Expos – demonstrating the ways that these architectural interventions possessed deep political meanings that transcended mere aesthetics. The longer-term implications of this event thereby embedded what is seen as a narrative of progress and resilience, supporting an abiding image of Paris as a city capable of absorbing processes of renewal.

The penultimate pairing of papers shifts the focus to North America. James Fortuna considers two Expos held in the USA that were staged against the outbreak of war in Europe. New York's World's Fair and San Francisco's Golden Gate International Exposition, both of which opened in 1939 and closed in 1940, offered foreign governments the chance to represent their nations and prevailing ideologies in major cities in what was the still neutral USA. Against dismissals of Expos as mere spectacle, the author analyses what he terms the politically inflected organization of space within the Fairs and how that was experienced by fairgoers. He also indicates how the federal government worked with the Fairs' organizers to stimulate a new sense of civic nationalism through the reimagined built environments of each host city.

Ray Bromley also considers New York's relationship with Expos in a similar vein, although here including the World's Fair of 1964–65 as well as 1939–40. Like Fortuna, he explores the profound physical transformation of Flushing Bay and the Corona Dumps to create the showground that would be used for both events and underlines the role of Robert Moses, who directed land reclamation for the first Fair, and would later serve as President of the second one. Both Expos offered visions of ultra-modern car-dominated cities of the future alongside the obligatory messages of world peace and prosperity, but both were severely impacted by the climate of global and national political and military events of the times. Despite neither event breaking even financially, the legacy of the investments made between 1934 and 1967 is seen as having created momentum for ongoing recreational and real estate development projects, the largest of which are currently under construction.

The final paper in this collection, by Qianyu Lu and Richard Hu, provides critical analysis of how Shanghai's Expo 2010 provided the People's Republic of China with a platform by which to showcase its vision of sustainable urban development. In doing so, the Chinese government played a central role in orchestrating a top-down approach to urban planning that saw the Expo used to transform industrial and waterfront areas of the city into modern, green urban spaces. The regeneration was overlain by a symbolic shift towards eco-conscious urbanism, with green technologies, sustainable architecture, and environmental awareness, although the authors argue that this was often more as spectacle than representing deep systemic change. Their conclusion – that there may well be a gap between stated intention and reality – is a finding with which many of the authors in this special issue would broadly concur. While Expo 2010 manifestly projected an image of sustainability, this may well be belied by underlying tensions over displacement of population, the environmental costs of construction, and the performative nature of green branding. It is questionable as to whether such events truly lead to lasting ecological transformation or serve more as political and economic tools.

The official mission of Expos is to advance education, progress and cooperation and the special issue introduced here contributes to this agenda too – by enhancing understanding, challenging established ideas, and bringing disparate work together.

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