

# One

## CREATING THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

*The eyes of the Fair are on the future—not in the sense of peering into the unknown and predicting the shape of things a century hence—but in the sense of presenting a new and clearer view of today in preparation for tomorrow.*

—Official Guide Book of the New York World's Fair 1939

The 1939–1940 New York World's Fair began, as so many grand projects do, as a way to make money. Chicago's Century of Progress exposition, which had opened in 1933, was so successful that it returned for a second season. The positive international press, and more importantly the resultant tourist dollars, resulted in several studies across the country on the feasibility of other world's fairs.

In New York, the effort started in 1935 with a small group of seven business leaders and politicians, led by George McAneny (a prominent banker and politician), Grover Whalen (the city's former police commissioner), and Percy Selden Straus (president of R. H. Macy and Company). That fall they hosted a meeting for 121 influential executives and politicians and presented glowing projections of the profits that would result from the fair. Their estimates envisioned 40 million visitors in a single season and another 24 million possible if a second year was added. The enthusiastic response to this meeting led to the formal creation of the fair corporation, led by Grover Whalen. Sixteen Manhattan banks loaned \$1.6 million to start the project, and by the time the gates opened, spending had reached \$156,905,000.

The fair was ostensibly tied to the 150th anniversary of George Washington's presidential inauguration in 1789 in New York City, which was then the nation's capital. This link was suggested by civil engineer Joseph Shadgen, who is also credited with suggesting the fair's location. The site chosen was a desolate landfill in the borough of Queens, described by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* in 1925 as a "valley of ashes." With the enthusiastic backing of the city's park commissioner, Robert Moses, and Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, work began on transforming the dump into a site suitable for a world's fair. The project included more than 62 miles of roads, 200 buildings, 10,000 trees, 2 million shrubs and bushes, exhibits by 58 nations and 33 states, 76 concessionaires, 1,354 exhibitors, and 310 places to eat. The fair opened on April 30, 1939, inviting the world to explore its theme, "Building the World of Tomorrow with the Tools of Today."



The fair's president, Grover Whalen, pictured on the left with an unidentified woman, promoted both the event and himself at every available opportunity. A consummate showman, he was frequently seen escorting VIPs around the fair, always impeccably attired. While some press accounts criticized Whalen for his self-promotion, he more than succeeded in getting the fair into the local and national news, thus establishing it as an important international event.



Flushing Meadows offered the designers a blank canvas, but it also posed some staggering challenges. The site had none of the infrastructure needed for the fair, such as plumbing or electricity; a river would have to be diverted; and decades worth of trash would have to be hauled away or compacted. All this would have to be done in less than four years to have the site ready for opening day.

## Two

# THE THEME CENTER

*For miles around and from every point on the site, your attention  
is arrested by the towering Theme Center.*

*—Official Guide Book of the New York World's Fair 1939*

In creating their world of the future, the fair's designers divided the Flushing Meadows site into several themed zones. Instead of a random mixture of pavilions spread across the site, themed zones allowed visitors to know in advance what section of the fair they wanted to explore. A trip to the Food Zone, for example, was sure to attract those looking to learn more about the subject.

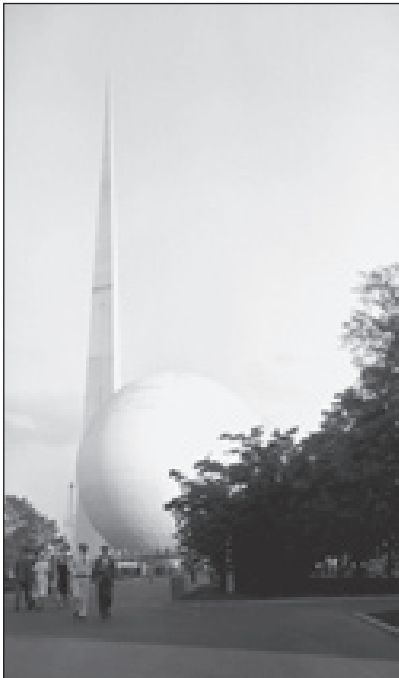
In the center of the zones was the Theme Center. Like the hub of a wheel, the Theme Center tied together the zones that radiated out from it into one cohesive design. Hoping to create a structure as memorable as the Eiffel Tower, which had been built for the Universal Exposition of 1889, the planners considered a wide range of designs. Some were rejected as too unimaginative; others were too abstract; and still others were too expensive or impossible to build. The design that was finally selected consisted of two very simple geometric shapes—a triangle and a circle.

Those were the basic shapes of the Trylon and Perisphere. The two unusual structures loomed far above the other buildings of the fair and were visible from as far away as Manhattan and the Bronx. The designs were very popular and were licensed for use on an estimated 25,000 products. Licensing such as this was a relatively new concept, but a good one, for it earned the fair \$1 million in the first season alone.

The Trylon and Perisphere were designed by Henry Dreyfuss, one of the most well-known industrial designers of the time. Dreyfuss's design called for the massive Perisphere to be balanced on eight relatively small pylons, a feat that required some very imaginative work in those precomputer days. Strategically placed fountains masking the mirrored supports created the illusion that the orb was weightless, rotating on the jets of water underneath. At night, moving images of clouds were seamlessly projected from nearby exhibit buildings using glass-mounted slides to complete the effect, making views of the two structures memorable indeed.



Viewed from any angle, the Tylon and Perisphere were a striking combination. The contrasting geometric shapes and stark clean lines made for a simple design, but the actual structures were engineering marvels. This view features Constitution Mall, the main axis of reflecting pools and sculpture that bisected the fair and led to the Lagoon of Nations. On either side are the Court of Communications (left) and the Court of Power (right).



The theme structures were easy to see from anywhere on the fair site, which helped visitors orient themselves in the maze of streets and walkways. The Perisphere was 18 stories tall and 180 feet in diameter, with a circumference of 628 feet. At a height of 610 feet, the Tylon was the tallest structure at the fair.

# Three

## THE TRANSPORTATION ZONE

*The Transportation Zone is devoted to many of the extraordinary inventions which have enabled Man to conquer time and space. The world has steadily grown smaller, its people ever closer together by improved methods of transportation.*

—Official Guide Book of the New York World's Fair 1939

One of the most popular areas at the fair was the Transportation Zone. While today a traveler can easily be on the other side of the world in hours, in 1939 travel was a much more time-intensive effort. Trains were the standard form of transportation between cities, and most international trips were by steamship. These forms of travel were very popular, though, as evidenced by the legions of young boys who built model train sets or the crowds that celebrated the departure of ships full of happy passengers.

The transportation industry was at a virtual crossroads, though, for air travel was becoming more common and the first early highways were making automobile travel easier. The railroad industry saw the fair as a way to reinforce its message that trains were still the best way to travel, so a number of the lines joined together to build the fair's largest exhibit.

As popular as the railroad display was, it had serious competition from the automobile industry. After years of depressed sales due to the Great Depression, the industry wanted to convince the public that they could once again afford to buy a new car. Each of the country's three major car companies was at the fair, and they spared no expense in extolling the virtues of traveling in the comfort of one's own car. All the pavilions showcased their latest products, but the favorite displays for many were the often-elaborate depictions of futuristic cars, highways, and cities.

With the massive infusion of cash required to build these pavilions, the Transportation Zone was a showcase of the strength of American industry. The money was well spent, for the area was attended by large crowds eager to see the newest ways to travel. This was especially true at General Motors, which was the most popular pavilion at the fair due to its prediction of the future in the Futurama ride.

Most of fair's predictions for the future have yet to appear, especially computerized highways and planned cities. One major prediction did come true, however, for the automotive industry did, indeed, surpass the railroads.



The Corona Gate South, one of the main entrances to the fair, led directly into the Transportation Zone. Admission prices in 1939 were 75¢ for adults and 25¢ for children ages 3 to 14. A variety of other discounted tickets and packages was also available, including annual passes for \$15 and \$5, respectively.



Just to the left of the south entrance turnstiles was the Eastern Railroads Presidents' Conference building, better known as the Railroads pavilion. Railroads were still the major form of transportation throughout the country, and the industry turned out in force. Twenty-seven railroads joined together in the largest building at the fair.

## Four

# THE COMMUNICATION AND BUSINESS SYSTEMS ZONE

*Modern civilization is based on Man's ability to receive knowledge, sentiments, ideas; the "World of Tomorrow" will largely be shaped by his ability, as well as his desire, to communicate.*

*—Official Guide Book of the New York World's Fair 1939*

In today's world of near instant communication to almost any part of the globe it may be difficult to realize how far things have come since the days of the fair. In 1939, many homes did not have a telephone, and for those that did, they may have had to share a party line with their neighbors. Long-distance calls required help from the always-efficient operator, as did even local calls in smaller towns. There were hardly any television sets in the entire world, and radio was the primary form of broadcast communication.

The tools of business were quite different as well. There were no computers, although IBM was already selling card-sorting systems that formed the basis of the accounting systems in many large businesses. There were no fax machines, no videoconferencing, and no pagers. So, then, what projections did the fair have in these areas for the world of tomorrow?

In this period, the peak of radio and the early dawn of television, there were not very many visible advances in comparison to exhibits in the other zones. Most of the exhibits in this zone, the smallest at the fair, were rather pedestrian displays of encyclopedias, children's books, typewriters, bank vaults, and mimeograph machines. The major points of interest were at the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) pavilions, where demonstrations of the latest advances in communications attracted steady streams of visitors. The fair was the first opportunity for most people to see a working television set, to use a tape recorder, or to make a long-distance telephone call.

There was one major form of communication that was overlooked at the fair. In the year that gave such memorable films as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, there was no mention of Hollywood and its proven ability to reach the masses. Perhaps the fair organizers saw Hollywood as too much of a competitor.



The Court of Communications stretched from the Theme Center to the Communications Building. On the side of the building was this inspirational message: "Modern means of communication span continents, bridge oceans, annihilate time and speed. Servants of freedom of thought and action, they offer to all men the wisdom of the ages to free them from tyrannies and establish cooperation among the peoples of the Earth."

A colorful mural that represented the different ways mankind has communicated over the ages greeted visitors as they entered the building. The mural was the work of Eugene Savage, and the futuristic elements and style were a departure from his better-known paintings of Hawaii and Polynesia. Among other displays inside was a 12-minute show demonstrating the various means of communications and their history.





# Five

## THE FOOD ZONE

*If you pause and think, you realize that the miracle of the “loaves and fishes”  
is no more incredible than the food miracles of today.*  
—Official Guide Book of the New York World’s Fair 1939

Food has always been an important part of world’s fairs. Heinz gave away the first of millions of pickle pins in 1893 at the World’s Colombian Exposition, which is also credited with popularizing chili in the United States. The Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 is known for the creation of the ice-cream cone and for popularizing iced tea, Dr. Pepper, and puffed rice cereal.

The 1939–1940 fair is not famous for any special food or drink, but the exhibits in the Food Zone were quite important nonetheless. At the time of the fair, most homemade meals were prepared daily using fresh food that came from local farms or small markets, supplemented by canned fruits and vegetables. Many foods were only available during short growing seasons or were relatively unknown. Seeing a potential vast new market before them, several of the country’s largest food manufacturers used the fair to get their products into public view.

Preparing meals should be easy. That was the key message at many of the pavilions. There was no need to spend hours in the kitchen baking bread when you could pick up a loaf at the market. Frozen foods offered a wider range of ingredients, were easy to prepare, and were available year-round. Quicker shipping using refrigerated trucks and trains meant a wider selection of fresh fruits and vegetables in local markets.

While all the Food Zone exhibits had been created to drive future sales, there was also an educational component to most of the pavilions. The concept of a balanced diet was explored, along with the importance of watching calories and taking vitamins. Knowing that most visitors would have quickly brushed off such issues as dull and unimportant, these shows included circus animals, mechanical hosts, performing cows, Edgar Bergen’s famous costar Charlie McCarthy, and perhaps the most successful element of all: free samples.

Not all the displays were about healthy products though. Several of the pavilions were sponsored by companies that sold tobacco or alcohol products, items generally not considered food even in the less-educated days of the fair.



The main route through the Food Zone was the Avenue of Pioneers, seen here from the corner of Market Street. At the opposite end was Lincoln Square, site of the Schaefer Center. The arrow-shaped shafts to the left were two of the four oversized stalks of wheat that marked the zone's theme building, the unimaginatively named Food Building No. 3.



Fairgoers got to see something at the Swift and Company pavilion that was probably not seen at any other world's fair—raw meat processed into hot dogs. Guests could also watch bacon being packaged and other examples of how meat is prepared for sale. The pavilion included displays on the roles of livestock farmers, butchers, and retailers. Visitors received free recipe booklets and could eat at a café that served Swift's products.

## Six

# THE GOVERNMENT ZONE

*Here the peoples of the world unite in amity and understanding, impelled by a friendly rivalry  
and working toward a common purpose: to set forth their achievements of today  
and their contributions to the "World of Tomorrow."*

—Official Guide Book of the New York World's Fair 1939

Of all the themed sections of the fair, the most important by far was the Government Zone. While many of the industrial pavilions were quite impressive and drew larger crowds, they were not what made a world's fair more than just a giant trade show. As the very term *world's fair* implies, a successful exposition will have a significant level of international participation. The 1939–1940 New York World's Fair more than succeeded in this area.

One of the criticisms of Chicago's Century of Progress was that it had few international pavilions. Determined to correct this at his fair, Grover Whalen made a significant effort to get as many countries as possible signed on as exhibitors. Whalen made numerous trips overseas, including a crucial visit to the all-important Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) in Paris.

The BIE had been formed to control the number of fairs around the world to keep them from becoming too commonplace or conflicting with each other in their competition for exhibits and audiences. Whalen knew that it was essential to obtain BIE approval if he wanted its member nations to appear at the New York fair, but to do so he needed to make a significant concession.

BIE rules limit a fair to a single season, but Whalen and his team had planned a fair that was so big and so grand that it would take two years to recoup the building costs. Whalen skirted the rule by announcing that the fair would be for one season, and the BIE gave its consent.

Whalen's sales efforts paid off, and 60 nations signed up, several of them participating in their first world's fair. One noticeable exception was Germany, for despite a concerted effort, the fair was unable to strike a deal for a German pavilion. The realities of the world's political situation were already taking a toll on events such as the fair.



The Government Zone was one of the largest sections of the fair. Anchored by the oval-shaped Lagoon of Nations, two rows of buildings on either side of a large plaza called the Court of Peace housed the smaller international exhibits, with the Federal Building at the far end. Off to both sides of this view were the state and larger international pavilions.



The Court of Peace was used for a wide range of performances. Special salutes were held regularly to honor the exhibiting nations, usually with performances of native dances or parades by affiliated social groups. The area was also used for other events such as this celebration of the completion of Rockefeller Center in Manhattan.

## Seven

# THE COMMUNITY INTERESTS ZONE

*Visitors will understand, that in the broad sense, much of the entire Fair is devoted to Community Interests. But here in this Zone will be found many of the exhibits which treat more directly with Man's life in the group and his communal interests.*

—Official Guide Book of the New York World's Fair 1939

Many homes have a place to store things that do not belong anywhere else. Perhaps it is a seldom-used guest room, where old clothes and piles of books read long ago have come to rest. It might be a closet near the front door, packed full of coats, boots, and umbrellas, that is quickly walked past every day without much thought as to its contents. In many ways, the Community Interests Zone was the fair's version of such a closet.

The Community Interests Zone could have been one of the most successful at the fair, for it had two railroad stations that could handle crowds of 58,000 people per hour that emptied directly into the zone. Like the ignored closet near a front door, though, most people walked through the area on their way to see the rest of the fair.

The lack of interest is understandable. The pavilions in this section were an uninspiring lot, some with only a tenuous connection to the official themes of the zone—shelter, education, religion, recreation, and art. It is hard to understand how the exhibitors and fair corporation could have thought that people would be interested in looking at displays of radiators, asbestos, vacuum cleaners, and the ubiquitous Fuller Brush Company. There was precious little in the way of the world of tomorrow in any of the zone's pavilions.

However, there were some sections that were more successful than others. The Gardens on Parade display was popular with guests who were looking to get away from the noise of the fair. As might be expected, the Coty cosmetic counters were especially popular with women. Sadly, though, most of the exhibits were of little interest to guests, especially children. Like an entrance hallway, the zone was relegated to getting people inside but was not a place to spend much time.



The Long Island Rail Road station was designed to handle 18,000 train passengers per hour. Special trains provided service to and from Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan every 10 minutes. There was also a Greyhound bus station on the lower level. The station was partially destroyed by a fire early during construction, and crews had to race to have it ready in time for the fair.



The railroad used the slogan “From the World of Today to the World of Tomorrow in ten minutes for ten cents.” Most trains in the area required payment before boarding, but to speed up the loading of these trains in Manhattan, fares were collected when the passengers disembarked. The sign overhead said, “Please Have Your Dime Ready.”

# *Eight*

## THE PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION ZONE

*Stressing the increasing interdependence of peoples the world over, the Production and Distribution Zone is devoted primarily to industries whose task it is to transform natural resources into commodities necessary to the daily life of whole populations.*

—Official Guide Book of the New York World's Fair 1939

If the Community Interests Zone was a disappointment, the Production and Distribution Zone more than made up for it. The list of exhibitors read like a who's who grouping of some of the most prominent American industrial concerns of the time. Each, anxious to get closer to the top of that list, spent a large amount of money trying to make their pavilion more memorable than those of the competitors.

Spending money on a large pavilion is a relatively easy task. Using that money to attract large enough crowds to recoup the investment is not as easy, especially if many of the products shown are not directly sold to consumers. The challenge faced by many of the companies was to establish a link between their products and the end goods eventually available to consumers.

For example, rather than being available for sale or even usable by an end user, most of Du Pont's products were sold to companies that then incorporated them into finished goods. Visitors to the fair were unlikely to purchase rayon fabric directly from Du Pont, but with the right sales pitch they might become interested in buying a dress or shirt made of rayon, thereby ultimately benefiting Du Pont. Even companies with a large consumer sales base had major displays on other parts of their product lines, such as Kodak's promotion of its plastics and fabrics, or General Electric's and Westinghouse's exhibits of transformers and generators.

To a large extent the companies succeeded in improving their brand recognition. Most newspaper and magazine stories about the fair included a description of Westinghouse's time capsule and robot, the man-made lightning at General Electric, or perhaps the unusual architecture employed by United States Steel. Today, even with so many companies closing or consolidating, the majority of the large exhibitors in the zone are still in business. Indeed, some are leaders in their fields.



Many guests first glimpsed the Production and Distribution Zone from the Helicline. Below is the Court of Power, which led to the Plaza of Light with its circular fountain. Colorful plants masked the fact that the long walkway was actually facing the backs of the buildings on either side. More than one million tulips were used to create this beautiful display of colors and shapes.



Seen from the observation trellis of the United States Steel building, the *Four Elements* by Carl Paul Jennewein were situated where the Court of Power met the Plaza of Light. A full 65 feet tall, they were, despite their stark appearance, traditional representations of earth, air, fire and water. Adorning them were 48 gold-relief plaques illustrating these elements.



## Nine

# THE AMUSEMENT AREA

*In many respects it is the most comprehensive collection of thrilling, laughable,  
and picturesque diversions ever assembled from the far-flung corners of  
the earth for the enjoyment of the peoples of the world.*

—Official Guide Book of the New York World's Fair 1939

While much of the fair had scientific or industrial displays that promoted lofty ideals or technological advances, the Amusement Area offered up an astonishing pastiche of exhibits. There were trained animal acts near a show straight from Broadway. Guests could walk out of an extravagant water ballet and into a sideshow of nature's freaks. Some of the exhibits almost defy description, such as the pavilions that showed off live babies in incubators or nude women prancing through a re-created nudist colony. It must have seemed to visitors that all the circus sideshows had come to town.

Site surveys had shown that this part of the fairgrounds had the softest soil on the site, making it difficult to build the large pavilions seen at the rest of the fair. The engineers solved that problem by diverting the Flushing River to create Fountain Lake, with the Amusement Area curving along its shores. For the second year of the fair the lake was renamed Liberty Lake; today it is known as Meadow Lake.

Many of the exhibits in the Amusement Area were failures, and some did not stay in business through the duration of the fair. Trying to trace the comings and goings of the exhibits is difficult because some vanished so quickly that even the official guidebook could not keep up with the changes between printings. Some of the exhibits seen in vintage photographs were not listed in any editions, so there was sometimes little more than the information on their marquee to describe them.

The Amusement Area did have some successes, though. The Parachute Jump that stands over Coney Island today was the fair's most popular thrill ride, and the Aquacade set a standard for water-themed shows that has stood the test of time. Despite these bright spots, the Amusement Area is generally regarded as the least successful section of the fair. Perhaps people expect something classier at a world's fair.



Guests entering the Amusement Area from the main portion of the fair traveled over the Empire State Bridge to the New York State Plaza, which in turn fronted the New York State Amphitheatre and Exhibits. This statue by Raoul Josset was titled *Excelsior*, the state's motto. It was unlikely that anyone could forget whose fair this was.

Another major piece of art in the Amusement Area was *The Spirit of Flight* by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. A member of the famous Vanderbilt family, Whitney was a noted artist, socialite, and founder of the Whitney Museum of American Art. This was her last commissioned sculpture. It was supposed to have been moved to nearby LaGuardia Airport, but its actual location is unknown.



# Ten

## THE 1940 SEASON

*Grover is president of the Fair just the same as ever. I have just come in to help him  
with some details which perhaps I am better at than he is.*

—Harvey Dow Gibson

Throughout the fair's first year there was a great deal of uncertainty about whether it would return for a second season. The fair had been built based on a planned attendance of 40 million for the year, but when the gates closed the attendance had topped out at only 25,817,265. In addition to the estimated \$23 million lost by the fair corporation itself, many of the exhibitors and concessionaires had been unable to recoup their investments due to the resultant lower guest revenue. While a number of participants decided to cut their losses, many of the exhibitors returned for a second year in the hope of finally making a profit.

The fair of 1940 would prove to be different than the 1939 version. Harvey Dow Gibson, who had led the fair's financial committee, was elected chairman of the board. In taking over the reins from Grover Whalen, Gibson dropped many of the original plans and implemented what many critics called a "dumbed down" county fair style. The themed zones were eliminated, and buildings were leased to anyone who had a checkbook, with no consideration as to their location and design. Some pavilions were simply left empty for the second season and stood as sad reminders of the initial hopes for the fair.

The new fair also reflected the gathering winds of war, as in the new theme of "For Peace and Freedom." Fountain Lake was renamed Liberty Lake, and the massive Soviet Pavilion was shipped home and replaced by the American Common, site of a variety of patriotic and cultural displays.

However, Gibson fared no better than Whalen had. In fact, attendance was less in the second season with only 17 million guests. Although the fair was never able to repay its investors, to many it still remains the ultimate in world's fairs.



Grover Whalen played a key role in getting the fair reopened in 1940, traveling to meet with many of the exhibitors to negotiate their return. After several months of uncertainty during which many predicted he would fail, Whalen held a press conference in front of the New York City Public Library and proudly announced that the fair would indeed be back.



Whalen remained the public face of the fair corporation, but the second season was run by Harvey Dow Gibson, who, as head of the fair's financial committee, had approved many of the decisions later blamed on Whalen. Gibson remains a controversial figure for his stewardship of the fair.