

*The Fair, The City
and The Critics*

by

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I have been asked repeatedly by officers and directors of the World's Fair to explain the hostile or negative attitude of a small but influential part of the local or locally administered press and its communication brothers. Some of our people think the critics, who are of course in a minority, should be ignored. Others believe that they influence considerable numbers. Still others are simply puzzled by a phenomenon which seems inexplicable, especially as it involves fouling the entire city. I finally decided to state frankly to my loyal associates in the Fair what I conceive to be the facts, in anticipation of the second season of the Fair in 1965.

Every now and then the Fourth Estate is called upon to prove that it can take as well as dish it. I propose to test out this idea and at the same time to exhibit my own scars and stigmata, if not to yammer for alms and sympathy. Much more than the Fair—the City of New York is the victim. I am sure those who have made real sacrifices to promote the objectives of the Fair will accept my reasoning in the spirit of tolerance in which it is offered. The references of course are wholly impersonal and any resemblance to writers living or dead, not specifically mentioned by name, is purely coincidental. I allude to those to whom I refer. It is easy to identify them.

We of the Fair staff recently canvassed our top exhibitors, those who contributed in the largest measure to the Fair and are well satisfied with the results, to obtain constructive suggestions for our 1965 season. They responded most generously, and we are following their advice. One of the explanations most of them give for 1964 Fair attendance somewhat below the most optimistic guesses is illustrated by this quotation from a staff memorandum following a meeting of these corporation officials:

“The industrial exhibitors are concerned only that so magnificent a Fair—so much appreciated by participants as well as visitors

—deserves better publicity, particularly from the press. “X” felt the New York papers were hurting most. “Y” was vehement on the subject of outrageous, distorted, out-of-town coverage, including nasty exaggerations in reports emanating from New York City.”

I am a long way from figuring out what attracts or repels visitors on any given day — weather, vacations, the closing or opening of schools, picketing, alarms, excursions, riots, worry about travel, transportation and hotel accommodations, exaggerated and false stories about exorbitant charges in and outside of the Fair, undue emphasis on or neglect of this, that or the other type of exhibit, questions raised as to architectural and artistic taste, reported lack of amusements. All our studies indicate beyond question that a small but influential segment of the local press, including some magazines of wide circulation which have their headquarters in this city, have been a serious handicap.

Too much concern over snapping, buzzing, biting and stinging critics, winged or wingless, is a sign of weakness. Like those running for office, they must attract attention or die of inanition. Our critics seem to have attended courses at summer schools for fence writers where they have learned to poll-parrot the four-letter words Hemingway referred to as obscenities. Academic honors, if we have them, give us no privileges and immunities. We are at best *educated* bastards.

The cutest tricks known to journalism have been used to embarrass us, such as the slanted headline superimposed over the innocent dead body of the reporter, and without corroboration in the text. Wicked little gremlins and leprechauns monkey with the presses to the consternation of the editorial staff. It is, as the French say with shrugging shoulders and upturned palms, of a great sadness.

Today avant garde critics and leftwing commentators, traditionally pledged to free speech and respect for opinions of others however distasteful, break all records for intolerance of those who differ with them, especially middle roaders.

Jaded publishers give the avant garde a free rein. There is of course no unavoidable conflict between the press and the Fair. Our local critics have by no means concentrated their slings and arrows on the Fair. Others have had to bear fardels — the New York police, for example — as fine a body of guardians as any municipality the world over can boast.

The press and its brothers and sisters are at once our stimulants, our narcotics and our deodorants. After a while the stimulants lose their potency and the soporifics put us to sleep. As to the deodorants, the ads and commercials show that half our population is busily engaged in smelling good, but you will recall the tragic story of the man who cured his halitosis and found that he was still unpopular.

The witches had it: Fair is Foul and Foul is Fair. With a thousand brave sights to see at the Fair, they can only complain that they have missed the smile of the absent cat. Look at a piece of gratuitous, sophisticated nastiness in a recent Sunday article on “The Fair as Pop Art” in the New York Herald Tribune. I quote:

“...What is it all but prototypes of the Super-Environment of the Future, being built now to contain and engulf us all? The Fair is not all Environment, of course; there are plenty of just plain Objects—valuable, cheap, fascinating, boring, genuine and phony; objects to view (generally at a price) or to buy (at a higher price). The Pop Art Fair is probably the biggest Curio and Junk Shop Mart in history. It is certainly the Miscellany of All Time and it undoubtedly sets some kind of world’s record for ineffective ingenuity employed at displaying useless and gaudy wares.”

These hoot owls do not stop short of ridiculing religion. They befoul everything. In the Fair their droppings fall on Church as well as State. For example, one of the organs of the intelligentsia “The Reporter” in a piece entitled “God and Man at Flushing Meadow” says of the pavilions of religion at the Fair:

“In the midst of the fevered huckstering at the 1964 New York World’s Fair, religion has returned, no longer divine, no longer

master of events, but suppliant, competing hard with the other exhibitors in selling a unique product.

“The swamp at Flushing Meadow contains 130 pavilions serving Mammon and nine more or less serving God . . .

“ . . . The bountiful publicity given Michelangelo’s Pieta has made it at least as important a work of art as the Unisphere, and so the Vatican exhibit is second in attendance only to General Motors.

“In the Mormon Pavilion, statues, illustrations, dioramas, sacred texts, and aggressive young missionaries explain Mormon beliefs. In a film that allows no religious concept to go unrealized, men and women wander about the heavens in prelife and afterlife wearing what look like long white bathrobes . . .

“The Billy Graham Pavilion features illuminated transparencies of Dr. Graham on crusade, and a twenty-eight-minute movie in Todd-AO. It was filmed by Dr. Graham’s own company, and the evangelist is on screen most of the time. At the climax he invites the viewers to go behind the screen to his waiting counselors and receive Christ . . . The pavilion was designed by Edward Durell Stone, and alongside stands a hundred-foot steel tower sheathed in four thousand gold anodized discs and crowned with a gold sunburst and Billy Graham’s name in lights.

“ . . . The Churches of Christ exhibit features a machine that offers ‘Answers to 120 vital questions given instantly in the language of the Bible.’ All you have to do is press a button. A gift shop in the pavilion sells Glow-in-the-Dark praying hands for thirty-five cents.

“Despite this investment in spiritual salesmanship, thus far there is no sign of a religious renaissance emanating from Flushing Meadow.”

When you read such stuff you can hardly escape the conclusion that New York City has become a Cave of Adullam for the malcontents.

For good measure I toss in a few lines from a piece in “Life” magazine, another Luce publication, by Vincent J. Scully, Jr., a Yale professor of architecture. Scully brackets

Walt Disney and me as hopeless vulgarians. We don't begrudge the Luce publications the million dollars they may make as publishers of the Fair guide, which of course emphasizes Fair attractions, but we are mildly astonished at the ambivalence which at the same time pictures the Fair as a bum show and New York as a dying city full of wrath and tears. How many shoulders can a publisher carry water on?

“. . . Ford has its own tunnel of love, a diorama of past and future which you glide through in a convertible. It is by Disney, who so vulgarizes everything he touches that facts lose all force, living things their stature, and the 'history of the world' its meaning. Disney caters to the kind of phony reality—most horribly exemplified by the moving-and-talking figure of Lincoln elsewhere in the Fair—that we all too readily accept in place of the true. Mr. Disney, I'm afraid, has our number.

“But so does Mr. Moses; for when all is said and done, his Fair is exactly the kind of world we are building all over the U. S. right now . . . The Fair is nothing but the concentrated essence of motel, gas station, shopping center and suburb. Why go to New York to find it, then, when we have it all at home?”

Here are some gaudy excerpts from a poisonous article entitled “A City Destroying Itself” by one Richard J. Whalen in the September 1964 “Fortune”:

“The disorder of the Nation's largest city is unique in the sense that its scope cannot be duplicated elsewhere . . . However, it is not the economic disorder that throws a shadow across an urban civilization. The truly terrible costs of New York are social and spiritual . . . For the city has walled itself in. Highways separate the inhabitants from the water, and tall buildings rise above the roads, shutting out the view of the rivers . . . The waters around the city are heavily polluted . . . Once the waters of Jamaica Bay could be used for swimming, and the bottom was carpeted with shellfish free for the taking. Now it is a rank cesspool, which will not be even partly reclaimed for at least a decade or two . . .

“Because of the tax laws uniquely favoring speculative building and real-estate syndication, an experienced and unusually candid

operator denies that his ventures involve capitalism. 'It's state socialism for the rich.'

"An example of such 'socialism' is federally subsidized urban renewal, which enables the favored real-estate operator to enrich himself through the use of municipal power . . .

". . . Central Park is coveted partly because it's there and partly because people use it (although not after dark, except in a few well-lighted places). If the city will lop off the loveliest corner of the park, opposite the Plaza, where people naturally gather, Huntington Hartford stands ready to donate an outdoor restaurant . . .

"The truth is that serious-minded voters have given up all hope of having responsive, efficient city government. They believe they live within an unfathomably complex system, which mysteriously runs on momentum and periodically collapses into anarchy."

Now let us look briefly at one of these libels, the one about Jamaica Bay. The recapture and conveyance to the City Park Department of all of Jamaica Bay with its many islands and meadowlands, unspoiled, free from squatters and other encumbrances — a game refuge of over 12,000 acres — was in fact an undeniable triumph of urban conservation. On the north shore of the Bay an immense additional acreage is being covered with sanitation and hydraulic fill, topsoil is being manufactured and trees and shrubs planted, a program representing forethought and courageous planning, some thirty years in the making and not yet finished. The comparatively small sewage pollution is being eliminated.

If you like easily accessible woods and lakes opposite Manhattan, at the foot and top of the Palisades there is an interstate park of 45,000 acres stretching up the Hudson, the like of which is not to be found in any other metropolis. Harry Luce could march his demon staff to the North River helicopter base a few blocks from the office and we could have them over an unspoiled wilderness in twenty minutes. That, however, would hardly lend itself to an obituary of New York. The beady, beady eyes of the researchers without cheaters

or telescopes, without leaving the Time-Life-Fortune Ivory Tower, without cracking a book or interviewing a victim, can make out Jamaica Bay on the southeast and the Palisades on the northwest. Where there is no vision, the people perish, and where there is no loyalty to it, the town dies.

It all depends on what you are after. If it's dirt, you will find it underfoot. If it's people, we have plenty of first-rate portrait photographers. Look at the Morris Warman "Portraits of Our Time" collection in the Better Living Pavilion. I have asked Francis Thompson, who made the Johnson's Wax film, "To Be Alive", and is doing one for us to show between seasons, to have a look at the cheerful, eager, polite faces in the crowds at the Fair, the folks in slacks and those in their best bibs and tuckers. The chief emphasis of his film will be on the warmth, humanity and happiness visible these summer days on Flushing Meadow. That's the Fair. That's New York after three hundred years. That's America.

Defacers of walls and underpasses give us their fatuities for nothing, but some publishers actually *pay* for such recordings. Those who fire such broadsides at New York get their best ammunition from our own arsenals. No wonder the rest of the country looks at us askance as we foul our own nest, notes our lack of local pride and loyalty and concludes that New York is not even *part* of the United States.

It is amusing to note that in the theater field the critics behave about as they do at the Fair. Recently in "The New York Times" Elia Kazan, Co-Director of the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center, wrote in a piece entitled "On Process":

"It's been fascinating to watch the reaction of people to our efforts. Audiences have been generally very friendly and frequently enthusiastic. But among intellectuals and especially within our profession it's been quite another story. Why such venom from these people? If I didn't know better I'd say that the only possible explanation is that they are so angry because somehow they feel threatened. But who's threatening anybody?"

Sean O'Casey, God rest his gallant Irish soul and gift of laughter, said it even better:

"In Ireland the critical faculty — critical in its denigratory sense — is hyperdeveloped. In a society firmly based on the principle that 'what goes up must come down', everyone waits maliciously with beady eyes cocked for the collapse of the next victim. The almost audible sharpening of knives, the gleeful anticipatory chuckle of those ranks of Tuscany who make a lifetime's occupation of forbearing to cheer, would make the strongest think twice about exposing himself in the arena."

In the familiar jingo tradition they gave O'Casey the works. It was a sort of Celtic ostracism, except that most of those on enforced vacations didn't come home.

New York, the avant garde says, is committed to the principle that all people are the same size. Time was when New York was pictured as the shining goal of ambition and talent, with careers open to all on equal terms. We boasted of free competition in a place where, as the Bible says, bread is to the wise, riches to men of understanding, and favor to men of skill. The equalitarians however, who don't know what has put us at the front, and what alone can keep us there, aim to make this city a dormitory where all are cut down to one uniform, standard size and shape — a municipal bed of Procrustes.

They will not succeed. New York City is too ambitious and basically too proud to be reduced to such mediocrity. To paraphrase Daniel Webster, it is a large city, but there are those who love it. The overwhelming majority of our people have not been heard from yet when it comes to their genius, their willingness to compete and to work together, their loyalty and their ambition for their children.

Where are the sons and daughters of the poor immigrants who rejoiced as they passed through the Battery and Ellis Island to settle here or fare forth into every corner of the land of opportunity? They did not whine for security,

ask guarantees against fear and demand easier work and ever-increasing handouts.

Before the peddlers and newsstand operators became merchants, before the factory workers by organization acquired decent wages, fringe benefits, political power and a wide welfare program, the immigrant, out of gratitude as well as pride, wanted his sons to be doctors, lawyers, professional men with status and titles. This was more important than money, and the one avenue was education. When such family ambition is dead, the light in the Lamp of Liberty dies too and the age of the immigrant is over. I for one do not believe that the pioneer instincts of those who stayed here are atrophied or that they lost the conviction that, like the Great Apostle, they are citizens of no mean city.

We badly need the press and all other mediums of communication between those who seek to build and the great public which must be informed in order to decide rightly. We need gadflies and even an occasional wasp, but hardly so many ants, army, black or red, who believe the public should get only the bad news. There is no good reason for it. It is only necessary for the press, in all of its ramifications, to assume that those who run the Fair have no ulterior motives and for the Fair executives to be persuaded that the press is primarily interested in fearless presentation of the facts.

With such an agreement on main objectives, differences in detail will be entirely consistent with mutual respect, and there will be a new dawn when the Fair reopens next April. Why not try this formula?