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RICHARD WEINBERG/WEINBERG MODERN



An aficionado of modernism
rediscovers the New York
World's Fair

wonders of the world

Controversy has surrounded

the New York World's Fair ever since it opened in 1964. Though large in the scheme of things, comprising over 200 exhibits spread across 650 acres in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, the fair was not quite a World's Fair, technically, not being endorsed by the Bureau International des Expositions and not including Eastern Bloc countries. Design reviews at the time condemned the jury-rigged visual jumble, a blatantly commercial product of private corporate control, for failing to adhere to the orthodox, orthogonal modernism epitomized by Louis I. Kahn or Venturi and Rauch.

Nevertheless agreed on, both then and now, is that the fair was exciting and entertaining. It provided a first glimpse, for many, of technological wonders that subsequently became staples: the microwave oven, push-button and speed dialing, color television, and computer interfaces. For many young designers among the 51 million visitors, the mix was visually inspiring, even formative. For a future dealer and curator specializing in vintage furnishings—myself at 5 years old—the fair was, well, a big deal.

It presented itself to me not as cacophony but as a vast kaleidoscope of sensory stimulation. Everywhere, there were new things to see and do, buttons to push, rides to ride, exotic scents to smell, and untried things to eat. Details burned into my memory include the Unisphere, omnipresent global symbol of the fair; the Eastman Kodak Company pavilion's enormous revolving slide carousel, aka the Picture Tower; the Ford Motor Company rotunda's Magic Skyway ride through time, starting in the era of Tyrannosaurus rex; the parabolic phone booths for Bell Systems; Michelangelo's *Pietà*, lent by the Vatican; multiple moonscapes; the line to get on the monorail; the Belgian waffles and Mexican tacos. A new song ran continually through my head: "It's a world of laughter, a world of tears/It's a world of hope and a world of fears. . . ."

However nice it might be to think that the fair opened my eyes to the mid-century design that would become my calling at Weinberg Modern, I was probably too busy with the dinosaurs and the waffles to truly appreciate much else. Fortunately for me and for posterity, I was accompanied by my father, Richard. A lawyer by profession and a photographer by passion, he spent his time shooting the exhibits and the passing scene. Looking through his lens—both the well framed

Opposite, from top: *The Unisphere, Gilmore D. Clark's symbol of the 1964 fair. Lunar craters, valleys, and seas depicted in plastic on the roof dome of the Transportation & Travel pavilion by Clive Entwistle Associates.*

Clockwise from top left: *Larry Weinberg at age 5 with a fiberglass ankylosaurus, part of the Sinclair Oil Corporation's Dinoland. IBM's theater by Eero Saarinen Associates. The plastic canopy of the Tent of Tomorrow at the New York State pavilion by Philip Johnson.*



compositions and the surprising angles—we can recapture some of the undeniable delights, apprehending that exuberant moment when *Mad Men* met the space race. My father knew as little about modern design as I did in kindergarten, but he knew a good photo op when he saw it. Notable are shots of the IBM "egg," an ovoid theater, and New York State's multicolored Tent of Tomorrow. A close-up shows the Pepsi-Cola Company's Tower of the Four Winds, a 120-foot-tall kinetic sculpture. The exterior of the Vatican pavilion yielded a Corbusier-esque vignette.

Assisted by my father's photos, I can clearly see now much of what I ➤



missed then. The roster of first-rate design talent was impressive. This is one take-away: All you had to do was look in the right direction, choosing to focus on the likes of George Nelson Associates's car-shape Chrysler Group building, deemed "pop art at its best" by *Life* architecture critic Vincent Scully, Jr., rather than fixating on, say, Wisconsin's shed housing a giant block of cheese.

Eero Saarinen Associates completed IBM's theater shortly after Eero Saarinen himself passed away, with Charles and Ray Eames making contributions to the interiors and the programming. Welton Becket and Associates designed General Electric's Progressland, a glass dome suspended from spiral pipes. With the Tent of Tomorrow's plastic canopy tethered with cables to slip-formed concrete columns, Philip Johnson created the world's largest suspension roof. And Donald Deskey Associates, its namesake having contributed mightily to the 1939 New York World's Fair, collaborated this time round on the Travelers Indemnity Company pavilion's iconic umbrella shape. Basically adapted from bicycle wheel spokes, it became the subject of the New York University doctoral thesis written by one of the project's structural engineers.

(He had been working for Lev Zetlin & Associates, which constructed the Travelers pavilion and a dozen others.)

Nelson, Saarinen, Eames, Johnson, Deskey. The Fair doubtless provided my first exposure to these giants, but it would take a long time for me to appreciate that fact. I was not entirely alone in this, though. It likewise required decades for architectural criticism to come around on Saarinen, whose exuberant shell structures have been so influential on the computer-generated designs of Santiago Calatrava, Gehry Partners, and Zaha Hadid Architects. Ultimately, the way we view the fair will be tied to the way we view the early 1960's in the U.S., which for better or worse the fair reflected. The period will continue to entice us with its stylishness and sense of possibility while maddening us as a brief interlude before sobering realities manifested themselves. But, hey, I was 5 then, and for me the 1964 New York World's Fair will always be magical. —*Larry Weinberg*



Clockwise from top left: Outside the Vatican pavilion, featuring a mixed-media sculpture by Vytautas Jonynas. Bell Systems's family telephone booth, basically an enclosed, air-conditioned speakerphone. Part of the George Nelson Associates–designed Chrysler Group pavilion, the other part being shaped like a car. The Eastman Kodak Company's Picture Tower.

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