

Designing Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s

October 2009 – January 2010
National Building Museum, Washington, DC

*"Here are the materials, ideas and forces at work in our world.
Here are the best tools that are available to you;
they are the tools with which you and your fellow men can build the World
of Tomorrow."* New York World's Fair Guide (1939)



Background

During the years of the Great Depression, nearly one hundred million visitors flocked to six world's fairs in cities across the United States. Unlike previous fairs, these expositions looked to the future and associated that vision with modern architecture and design. Introduced to television, robots, and houses and highways of the future, fairgoers came face-to-face with a vision of modern life and material abundance. The network of expositions promised salvation from Depression-era hardships and depicted a brighter future for all.



At the world's fairs of the 1930s, architects seized the opportunity to experiment with style, building materials, and construction techniques. The first generation of industrial designers left their mark in the form of corporate displays, streamlined trains, and modern houses. Together, these creative forces produced spectacles of consumer fantasy and foreshadowed the fully-realized consumer culture of post-war America.

Designing the World of Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s will be the first exhibition to explore the architecture and design of the world's fairs of the 1930s. The featured fairs include:

- Chicago, Century of Progress Exposition (1933/1934)
- San Diego, California – Pacific International Exposition (1935/36)
- Dallas, Texas Centennial (1936)
- Cleveland, Great Lakes Exposition (1936/1937)
- New York, New York World's Fair (1939/1940)
- San Francisco, Golden Gate International Exposition (1939/1940)

Exhibition

Designing the World of Tomorrow presents the US world's fairs of the 1930s as forums for the popularization of American modernism. It features nearly 200 objects never before assembled and film including amateur footage, corporate sponsored films, and newsreel. Designed as an immersive experience, the exhibition will evoke the spectacle of the fairs, featuring a walk-in installation based on the Futurama (General Motors pavilion, New York World's Fair) and several interactive components.

This 6,000-square-foot exhibition is organized into eight galleries and will feature an introductory video presenting a brief history of world's fairs. Iconic artifacts from the fairs -- including Elektro the talking Westinghouse robot, furniture from the Houses of Tomorrow, the RCA television model first introduced at the New York World's Fair (1939), and architectural elements -- will anchor the following sections:

Welcome to the Fair. Visitors will be introduced to the fairs of the 1930s and learn what made them different from those that came before. A near-life size projection of moving images culled from footage of the crowds at the expositions will provide a sense of the energy at the fairs.

A Fairgoing Nation. Presented on a room-sized map of the United States, this gallery dramatically demonstrates the nationwide character of the fairs. At the site of each fair, a kiosk presents statistics about the fair. Wall-mounted cases and panels dedicated to each fair explore variations among the fairs and shared visions. Visitors pick up a "passport" that they will stamp at locations throughout the exhibition signifying a "visit" to each fair.

Building a Better Tomorrow. This section features architectural and design drawings, remnants from pavilion exhibits, and photographs of buildings, sculpture and murals to explore the modernism and innovation of the fairs. It will discuss the transformation of the corporate industrial exhibit.

Better Ways to Move. All of the fairs included a zone or building dedicated to travel. This gallery examines the emphasis on transportation at the fairs (including a fascination with air travel) and the seminal role of the design of trains and other vehicles in the development of a streamlined aesthetic with its association with speed and efficiency.



Better Ways to Live. Corporations and trade groups sought to demonstrate how innovations in technology, materials, and consumer products could enhance, and help define, contemporary life. This gallery presents photographs and plans of the expositions' full-scale model houses and original furnishings from the "houses of tomorrow."

Better Times. Exhibits in the corporate pavilions associated mechanization and industrial progress with increased leisure time. This section explores improvements in leisure and communications (including the TRK-12 introduced by RCA at the New York World's Fair), and fanciful notions of time- and labor-saving devices brought about by the embrace of modern technology in the home.

Legacies. In the last gallery, the exhibition answers questions such as: What happened to the fairgrounds when the world's fairs were over? How well did the architects and designers predict life in the next, twenty-first century? Visitors will compare the projections of the 1930s to today's reality.

For information about sponsoring this exhibition, please contact development at (202) 272-2448.



BENEFITS OF SPONSORSHIP

Designing Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s

Each sponsorship level includes the lower level benefit categories.

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