

How Walt Disney infected the design of Expo 86 and why we should all be frightened as Hell about it . . .

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FIRST OFF, A MILDLY UNORTHODOX HISTORY OF THE EXPO DESIGN PROCESS:

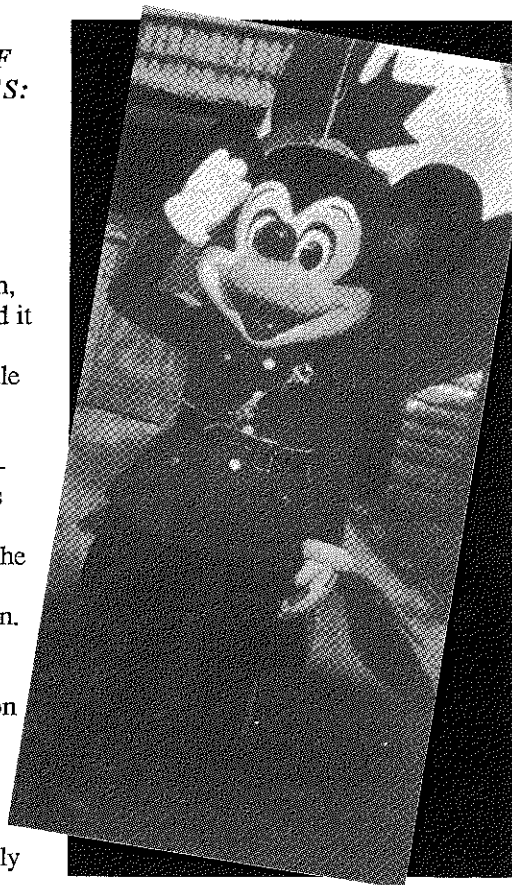
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NOBODY REALLY KNOWS exactly where and when the idea of having a world exposition in Vancouver was born, or from whose mind it was, er, hatched. The original rationale for holding it is equally murky. Probably some mid-level bureaucrat was demonstrating how innovatively he or she could think, and a chain-reaction set in.

What made B.C.'s Social Credit government agree to fund an exhibition is considerably clearer. They saw it as a means of securing a powerful megaproject presence within Vancouver's downtown core. City of Vancouver governments, since the early 1970's, had been moving slowly and steadily to the left, and were taking political positions that were increasing in fundamental opposition to Sacred megadeveloper policies. The Sacreds purchased a large block of land on the north shore of False Creek from Marathon Realty (then Canadian Pacific's development arm), and formed two crown corporations: B.C. Place Corporation to assemble land for the exposition, and the Expo Corporation itself to build and run the exposition.

The Expo board of directors--headed by multi-millionaire entrepreneur and born-again Christian Jim Pattison--went out and hired a local architect, Bruno Freschi, as its chief architect. He was given the minimal conceptual parameters the management team had in their possession, no real budget limitations, and some slightly more concrete physical perimeters to work with. "Design!" he was told.

For about a year, Freschi and a group of designers he hired to help him did just that. Freschi's designs were somewhat fantastical for the sober-minded Expo Board. More damaging, they were outrageously expensive. Freschi was soon pushed to the design sidelines, although he remained, officially, the Chief Architect of Expo 86 through to the end. His substantive contribution to the site is the Expo Centre, at the east end of the site, and even that building is greatly reduced from its original conception.



Freschi also laid out the rough conceptual blueprint for the Expo site. After he was kneecapped, four basic groups accounted for the design of the fair. These groups are quite distinct in character, mandate and ambition.

1.) The Contract Architects: This group consisted of the twenty-five or thirty architectural firms that designed most of the buildings on the fair site. The majority of those firms were local, although more than a few of them brought in exposition-experienced help for specific tasks. The architects were assigned portions of the site on an unusual ad hoc basis, thus bypassing the more conventional "design panel" selection of proposals one might have expected.

2.) The Expo Design Teams: There were a number of these, constantly reconstituted, and with lots of summary executions along the way. After Freschi was removed, a second wave of designers and architects, headed by Richard Blagborne, tried to find an interface between Freschi's grand ambitions and the limitations laid down by increasingly powerful budget-management teams. In that environment, they carried out the bulk of the site design.

A startling amount of this work was carried out in-house by young and

generally poorly-paid graduate architects who were hired for short periods, drained of their creative energies, and then fired. Some big-name architects were brought in, the most prominent of which was New Yorker James Wines to produce Highway 86, the monochromatic set-piece of the Expo site.

Finally, after Blagborne was carried off in one of the Expo board's administrative massacres, another wave of designers, headed by Creative Director Ron Woodall and Vancouver architect John Perkins, did the site embellishment that ultimately was the sole element in the entire fair design that made any attempt to integrate the different components.

Blagborne, Woodall and particularly Perkins did some brilliant and courageous work in an increasingly hostile budgetary environment. They also provided about the only explanations of the design process that have emerged. As a class II--or theme related--exposition, they correctly explained, Expo was not primarily an architectural exposition. On other occasions, they argued somewhat cryptically that Expo was a post-architectural exposition, a designation that may yet turn out to be prophetic.

3.) The Exhibit Designers: The exhibit modules that housed the various pavilions were meant to be neutral housing for the fair's "real" content--the exhibits. To cover senior management's growing disinclination toward architectural innovation, Expo spokespersons insisted that the fair's true content was going to be in the exhibits.

That was true in one sense, but misleading in several others. Generally speaking, the exhibits were disappointing--in fact most of the exhibits were a crashing bore. Their content in almost all cases was predictably secondary to the media used to present them.

4.) The Fourth Group: This group ultimately exercised the most powerful design influence, even though it is the most difficult to provide with a clear identity. It consisted of Jim Pattison, the Fair's Board Chairman, President and resident pixie; the right wing economic and political interests residing in the Expo Board of Directors; the budget controllers; Jesus Christ Your Personal Psychological Saviour, and Walt Disney. In a very important sense the various components of this group are more or less interchangeable.

EXPO'S WILD DESIGN ELEMENTS:

Expo's wild design process did contain two peculiar elements that deserve to be noted. They haven't received the attention they deserve, and aren't likely to in the future. A year before the exposition opened, The Expo Board decided that it did not want to fund an internal documentation of its design process. As a consequence, there is no consistent or complete source of documentary data available. A normally politicized procedure would have seen a politically coherent design panel select project proposals from a list of candidates. Such a procedure would have ensured an overall political coherence of design, and quite possibly a unanimity of materials and content.

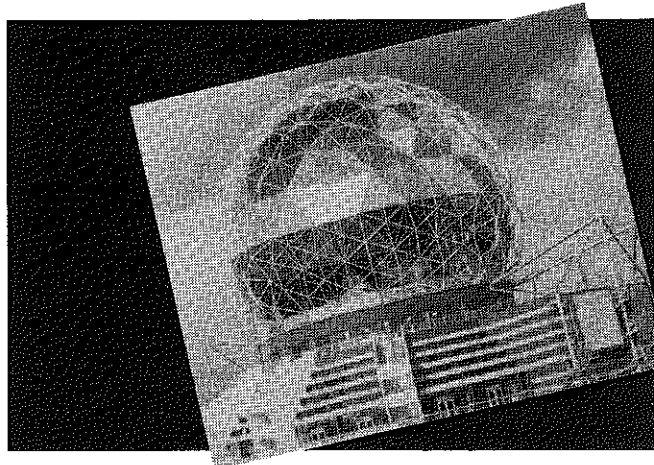
The Expo Corporation simply didn't have time for design selection panels and the result was that there was no consistent design strategy. In most cases, blocks of the site were parcelled out to various architectural firms, who then worked with the Expo design teams, the corporate clients involved, or with the provincial governments that funded the pavilions. The results were mixed, and the process is more revealing than the product.

The succeeding waves of Expo's in-house design teams produced at least one recurrent design element that sets Expo 86 apart from its two immediate predecessors, the 1984 fair at New Orleans, and Japan's Tscuba fair in 1985.

The New Orleans fair offered up just one inter-coherent aesthetic element, the Wonderwall. The Wonderwall was a seamless Disneyfied web of laundered cartoon images meant to cover up infrastructure and to present food and other consumer opportunities. The Wonderwall got a lot of positive attention, probably because nothing else at New Orleans was even remotely worthy. Most of the attention came from architects, who were intrigued by the technical virtuosity it displayed in covering up the weaknesses of an awkward site. The theme plazas at Expo 86 pretty much imitated the design parameters of the Wonderwall, with predictable results. They were spectacular, visually stimulating (from a distance) and essentially without content.

Tscuba was typified by its exhibit modules. Properly looked at (with one eye on the structure and the other on the images revealed by the structure) the modules were black boxes. In fact, they were conventional Butler buildings with shiny, closed outer surfaces. Inside the modules there were entertaining, but ultimately closed technologies--a perfect image of the way Japanese corporations present themselves and their products to the public.

The architectural imagery presented by Expo 86 was quite different from both of these, and considerably less seamless. Partly, this has to do with the absence of a coherent body to govern the fair's presentational aesthetic. The other reason is more interesting. Anyone looking out across the Expo site could have noted a startling dominance of external structure--pipes, gantries, etc. The site embellishment done by John Perkins recognized this, and extended it in a series of thematic tower gates throughout the site. This dominance of external structure lent a curious tentativeness to the site that sharply contradicted the official message. My own speculation is that it was an unconscious registering of the reality most British Columbians face, whether in the overloaded professions or in the dying resource-extraction industries that fuel the B.C. economy. This part of Expo's imagination accurately registered both the uncertainty and the distrust of the smooth entrepreneurial *élan* projected by the rest of the fair.



AND NOW, A MILDLY UNORTHODOX EXAMINATION OF THE FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTUAL DECISIONS MADE AT EXPO, AND THE FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH WALT DISNEY:

A return to Bruno Freschi and the early period of Expo's design leaves us gazing warily at the most spectacular remnant of the fair, the Expo Centre. The Expo Centre is the geodesic Golfball covered by flashing lights that sits right off the end of Georgia Street. Together with the fountain in Stanley Park's Lost Lagoon to the west, it forms a polarity, or dumbbell, in the downtown core. Never mind that the connecting road on the east side of this piece of urban abstraction, the Georgia Viaduct, curves away to the north, away from the Golfball, thus making the dumbbell recognizable only at night, from the air.

The Expo Centre is one of Expo's permanent structures, designed to become an urban legacy. Inside it are a number of high-tech theatres, including an Omnimax, and another, smaller, theatre where people can voice their opinions electronically on what they

like and don't like about the presentations they see. It's a spectacular building, but originally it was meant to be quite a lot more spectacular.

Early in the design process, Bruno Freschi commissioned an outrageously expensive short film aimed at selling his concept of the design and purpose of the Expo Centre. A few months before Expo opened, I saw this film, and heard an embittered but carefully politicized Freschi outline what he'd had in mind. He'd designed the Expo Centre to have an *external* television screen, and to have it connected to something he called a "teleport", which was, when you cut the techno-rhetoric from what he was saying, a huge satellite receiving dish planted in the middle of False Creek. His demonstration film featured a lot of simple-minded but vividly coloured computer-generated graphics, declaring the geodesic dome model to be a symbol of "universality". Then, as a demonstration of what

universality is, the film treated us to several minutes of puerile graphic progressions that probably resemble what Disneyland would appear like to someone on LSD. After watching the film, I couldn't help feeling that it was lucky Freschi had been stopped when he was. His teleport was not built, and neither was the *external* screen.

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I've witnessed the effects of teleports. The last time I was in Hazelton, B.C., which is among the most beautiful landscapes in North America, there were 27 satellite dishes atop houses in the Indian reserve. As a result, the place was deserted. The residents were inside their houses, living half-way between Atlanta and Michael Jackson.

As for the external screen on the outside of the Expo Centre, the legacy it would have provided raises a rather macabre image of the citizens of Vancouver wandering down to the Expo Centre on Friday to watch Dallas or Miami Vice on the big screen, perhaps going inside first to register their electronic opinions as to which programme they want to watch. Some legacy.

Freschi's plans were cut back because they were too expensive, not because the Expo Board disagreed with them. The Expo Centre, both as originally conceived and as eventually built, resembles no other building on the planet so much as the geodesic dome at Disney's EPCOT Center. What Freschi meant by universality, unconsciously or not, was Disneyland. And for the most part, Disneyland is what fueled the imagination of Expo 86, from Jim Pattison down to the most obscure budget gremlins.

**SO WHAT IS THIS DISNEY BUSINESS, ANYWAY?
 A CONSPIRACY?**

Start by asking yourself what the content of Expo 86 was supposed to be. The official answer is that Expo 86 was a celebration of Transportation and Communications. Okay. Ask yourself why these need celebration. Then ask yourself just what was it about transportation and communications that the fair actually did celebrate.

The answer you'll get, before too long, is that those questions don't matter. And why are you being so critical, anyway? There is no place for critical consciousness like that in a post-modern "exposition" and no place for it in reality according to Disney.

The Disney imagination has increasingly dominated the post-war expositions. And as its influence has grown, the expository content of the expositions have become either descriptive--as in "Wow, here's a spectacular machine!"-- or purely formal: "an exposition is a celebration of an exposition". Sure, new products and new technologies are tolerated and even encouraged. But only for bulk and glitter. New or critical concepts are not. The medium is the message, and those who object are regarded as party-poops and possibly as dangerous subversives.

Describing Expo 86 as Disney-dominated isn't simply a metaphor. Almost the entire senior administrative staff was hired from Disneyland or from Disney inspired projects. Many of them were trained at Disneyland, and came to Expo from there or from the moving apparatus that the succession of World Expositions has created. As Expo took shape, these people became increasingly powerful. They took control because they were experienced managers of public imagination, and expert financial managers who knew precisely how much buzz could be bought for the available bucks.

STILL NOT CONVINCED?

Being afraid of Donald Duck and his pals may sound silly to most people. There are more easily assignable targets for our paranoia, right? Don't kid yourself. With the possible exception of McDonald's, the Disney corporation is the most pervasive cultural force in this civilization. Look a little more deeply into the Disney imagination, as reflected by the two major Disney installations in California and Florida.

Both depict a simplified world of "positive" expression: a seamless web of beneficent organization and control where almost everything is good and right, and where the few wrongs that do exist are, if not righted, at least revealed in their most positive aspect. Everyone smiles, everyone is happy. The Disneyfied imagination does not admit human environments like those in Cambodia or the Philippines; and train wrecks in Northern Alberta or missile silos buried beneath Iowa cornfields are proscribed. They simply do not exist.

There is no pollution in Disneyland, there is no disease, no mental illness or stress, and absolutely no tooth decay. Nobody is allowed to live out of shopping carts or in tin shacks or cardboard hovels. Such conditions reflect failure, and failure is not admitted. Technology is proposed as the solution to human frailty. Life is perfectly integrated within its material milieu, and the individual is moved from positive novelty to positive novelty, each of which is sweet, smooth and entertaining. "Problems?" whispers the subliminal Disney mantra. "We don't have any problems. There are no insoluble problems here."

Like I said, no critical content can be broached within the Disney imagination of reality. To criticize is to be negative. Thus, thematic content replaces it; always celebratory, easy to consume and digest. Disneyland is the cultural adjunct to a strain of capitalism that has become the dominant economic force in the world we live in. I call it binary capitalism--Planet of the Franchises. It seeks to create products and concepts which have a generalized appeal that can be duplicated and franchised on a global scale. As such, Disneyland and binary capitalism have become an alternative to the obligatory discourse communities and social contracts which are the bases of most Western democratic institutions. Together they provide the entrepreneurial frisson that nurtures the McDonald's corporation, or the Amway religion, or any of a hundred other leading organizations that make up the post-ideological Right.

The Disney imagination operates in some very direct ways. First, its seamless images degrade the value of what is local and what is particular. More destructively, its franchises draw off 5-10% of the profits to head office, thus removing the internal development and/or risk capital that creates internal growth in a local economy. Hence we are talking, in a very real sense, of the transformation of Vancouver (or any other local economy) into yet another teleport of the Global Village--an economic suburb of Disneyland dependent on external capital for growth and maintenance.

DIDN'T ANYONE OBJECT?

Expo 86 drew opposition from several groups during the design period. Because it downgraded--relentlessly and almost invariably--the value of local talent and industry, it was fought, for a while, by a not very successful alliance of artists, artisans, and their administrative advocates. In the end, enough of these people were co-opted by short term contracts to effectively silence them. The Expo planners, late in the process, even gave the artisans their own crafts pavilion.

Because the Disney imagination refuses conceptual risks of any kind--using both an economic and an aesthetic/litigative rationale--the Disneylanders were fought from within the Expo corporation by a few innovative people who wanted to present unorthodox but educative technological exhibits, such as the plan to have a car crusher on site that would use the crushed vehicles to build an accumulative sculpture. That idea, and others like it, didn't get to first base.

The car crusher idea is not Disneyland-acceptable because it doesn't present a one-sided and seamless view of technology. It is conceptually messy. The technical difficulties involved in presenting the project would have exposed the public not just to the noise and fanfare of a spectacle, but also to the double-edgeness of technological processes. All such proposals were therefore buried by the Disneylanders.

The Disneylanders were also fought by those elements within the operations and design teams that believed that there ought to be some serious content to the exhibit. Richard Blagborne, who is an Egyptologist, managed, I suspect by force of character, to have an exhibit of ancient Egyptian artifacts included. Unfortunately, few other exhibits containing historical or critical content were allowed by the Expo corporation. That was officially left to the national and/or corporate exhibitors, with predictable results.

SO WHY ARE WE SUPPOSED TO BE FRIGHTENED?

Let's be a little more specific. What was the scheme behind Expo's Disneyland design bias, and who or what was it meant to attack? It was the same as that behind all the other components of franchise capitalism: to erect a post-ideological monument to geopolitical globalism, which is to say, to propagandize consumerist values and habits, and to degenerate any other form of consciousness.

Globalist propaganda is of a very specific kind. It does not acknowledge the existence of the Third World, except where the Third World provides sanitized tourist facilities. It does not acknowledge the collusion between technology and military aggression, or the fact that the international community spent 900 billion dollars last year purchasing military weapons.

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And it does not acknowledge the technological and political uncertainty that is perhaps our primary global reality. Expo was designed to dazzle us and, ironically, to calm us about the future with a relentless onslaught of sterilized novelty. And that's exactly the effect it had on the vast majority of those who came.

The chief impact Expo 86 had was the one the Disneylanders designed it to have. As such, it was an attack on indigenous cultural and economic practices. Not surprisingly, a startling number of local cultural groups and businesses ceased to exist during the fair. Most of those without a globalist link suffered.

On a slightly larger scale, it isn't an exaggeration to link the current entrepreneurial frenzy in British Columbia to Expo. It is no accident that a series of right wing political victories have followed in its aftermath, nor that the B.C. lumber industry is the site of the most serious attack on the fundamental values of trade unionism in the post-war era. Isn't that the cause for fear?

OKAY, WHAT WERE THE SPECIFIC GOALS? AND WHAT WAS DISNEY'S GRAND MISSION?

Let's go up the scale from the venally local to the globally abstract. First, the Socreds wanted Expo to stimulate the economy on a short-term basis, and to have it serve as a greeting card for incoming capital investment and other entrepreneurial activity. Second, the same government wanted Expo as a springboard to get itself re-elected.

The development community--and in particular the architects and design teams who designed the various components at Expo--wanted a means of securing or enhancing their reputations. And since greater Vancouver is currently facing a development hiatus--it is overbuilt in nearly all sectors--they have tried to use Expo as a catapult out and into international markets. For Greater Vancouver's corporate business, the fair was regarded as an opportunity for a new level of networking and for some short-term profit-taking.

And finally, the Disneylanders wanted Expo to bring Vancouver into the "universality" network--into the mainstream of the Global Village, and under the benevolent supervision of the dictatorship of the Entrepreneurs. Under the EPCOT Dome, in other words.

I'm an optimist, so I won't say that the Disneylanders have succeeded in their mission. In most of the disputed arenas, the results are mixed. The government got itself re-elected, although the B.C. economy is in such a shambles that they may soon wish (along with the electorate) that they hadn't succeeded. Despite the state of the economy, the political right in B.C. is more certain of itself, and more convinced than ever of the correctness of

the entrepreneurial model for everything from economic development to interpersonal relationships. Most of them are probably more secure than they used to be that everything is A-Okay in the world, or that its unpleasant aspects can and should be ignored or avoided.

Certainly Expo has changed the outlook of a lot of people in Greater Vancouver, particularly the young. Many of them will probably go to Disneyland itself in the next few years to see the real thing. I've noticed that kids and adults alike have taken to bitterly complaining about any social event that doesn't include a fireworks display.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE? IS THERE A FUTURE AFTER EXPO?

Expo 86 did not take a serious measure of the future. It had no opinion about it whatever. It was an attempt to secure the present, and to reassure everyone that everything is just fine right now, despite conflicting evidence. It was not an artistic event, and it did not present a coherent set of ideas, artistic details, or architectural features--not, at least, that can be used as a basis for public discourse.

Expo 86 is currently being dismantled. Except for the Expo Centre, the complex around the B.C. Pavilion, and the rebuilt CN roundhouse, everything on the site is scheduled for demolition before July 1987. The facilities that remain will probably become tourist facilities. Certainly they aren't needed by the local community, and they aren't flexible enough in their design to be recycled.

The northeast portion of the site is slated for redevelopment by the site's crackbrained landlord, the crown corporation of B.C. Place, into a combination of retail, office and residential uses over the next few years. But since the development and land costs will be very high, there is unlikely to be much market for any of the proposed components. On the rest of the site, the demolition is unlikely to be completed on deadline, and cost recoveries are far below predicted levels. The exhibit modules, which were supposed to be recycled for community use across the province, turn out to be prohibitively expensive to move, and are simply being torn down, along with the monorail and other site facilities. Six months after the fair ended, Expo isn't very pretty or useful. The western end of the site has no development planned, and seems destined to be derelict for many years.

Our new premier is the proprietor of a third rate Disney debraining facility called Fantasy Gardens. Vancouver City has elected its first right wing government in years. The Disney teleport Bruno Freschi wanted built seems to be in place. There was a party in Vancouver, a very expensive one that brought the city into the suburbs of the Global Village. Its consequences are everywhere, and the citizens of Vancouver are going to be dealing with them for whatever future we are capable of imagining.

Brian Fawcett is a writer, teacher and planner. He is currently designing an industrial strategy for the city of York, Ontario. His most recent book is Cambodia: A Book for People Who Find Television Too Slow.

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