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1964 and the State of the City

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ON A BALMY SPRING DAY IN 1939 the New York World's Fair officially opened for business. That day it welcomed roughly two hundred thousand visitors to its extensive grounds, which had only recently been developed out of the old Corona ash dump. The fair's numerous pavilions and attractions all loosely coalesced around a single theme: "Building the World of Tomorrow"; the fair's desire to present visitors with a technologically enhanced future was encapsulated by its two core symbols, the Trylon and Perisphere. The Perisphere contained an installation called "Democracity," designed by Henry Dreyfuss and sponsored by the Fair Committee, which took visitors on a journey into the city of the future. A promotional booklet for Democracity explained its intent: "The City of Tomorrow which lies below you is as harmonious as the stars in their course overhead—No anarchy—destroying the freedom of others—can exist here. The streets, the houses, the public buildings . . . all are built in relation to all the others."[1]

Not far away at the General Motors Pavilion another exhibit, Norman Bel Geddes's "Futurama," reinforced this vision of the city. Both exhibits provided a bird's-eye view of a massive urban area, but an urban area that had been planned and streamlined in such a way as to eliminate the ills that plagued the

American city of 1939. There was no crime in the city of tomorrow, no slums, and no poverty. Human conflict and hardship had been eradicated by the heroic efforts of planners and designers. Progress was presented as inevitable and uniform. As Norman Bel Geddes himself put it, "for years there was talk that machinery had enslaved the individual, but now it can free the individual . . . the country as a whole will follow. Living in such a world of light, fresh air, open parks, easy movement, the man of 1960 will more naturally play his full part in the community and develop in mind and body."[2]

A generation later, in 1964 a second New York World's Fair opened in the same location. "Futurama" was reprised, and although it greatly expanded its plans for the world of 2024 (including underwater hotels and lunar restaurants), in many ways it continued the ideas that had been presented in 1939.[3] Again the city of the future featured fields of skyscrapers laced together by superhighways. Again business and residential areas were kept completely distinct from each other. Again the city was envisioned according to the demands of the automobile. Both iterations of "Futurama" were consistently ranked among the most popular exhibits at their respective fairs; both were seen by millions of fairgoers.

Yet the depictions of the city at the 1964 World's Fair were occurring in a different context than those of 1939. In 1939 a loosely affiliated group of urban officials, private businessmen, artists, and designers had presented a largely theoretical proposal for cities of the future. They envisioned a dense, vertical, business-oriented central city ringed by highways which radiated out to sprawling suburbs full of single-family homes, a set of ideas I refer to collectively as *midcentury urbanism*.

At the first fair these ideas had not yet widely pervaded the general culture or the lives of New Yorkers. In the generation that elapsed between the fairs, however, many of these principles were actively implemented in cities across America, and particularly in New York. The Housing Act of 1949 built upon enabling legislation of the 1930s and further directed federal funds to cities specifically for the purchase and demolition of tenement neighborhoods through Title I. New York had been the national leader in federally funded redevelopment during the 1930s; in the era between the fairs, it once again was the most energetic practitioner of urban redevelopment.[4] By 1960 New York had received $66 million in funds for slum clearance under Title I, nearly twice the amount of Chicago, the second-highest recipient.[5] Between the mid-1930s and the mid-1960s, utilizing first the New Deal and then other forms of federal funding, New York had cleared and rebuilt hundreds of acres of the city, built more than one hundred thousand units of housing, and created major new complexes like Lincoln Center.

By 1964, however, the cracks in midcentury urbanism had begun to show. The commitment to tie redevelopment to the demolition of existing structures

meant the displacement of thousands of New Yorkers. Critiques of large-scale urban planning and slum clearance were spreading; former supporters like Catherine Bauer and Lewis Mumford, architectural critics like Ada Louise Huxtable, conservative analysts like Martin Anderson, and public intellectuals like James Baldwin, among others, articulated the myriad ways midcentury urbanism had deepened inequity and racial injustice in the city and undermined the quality of the built environment. Although many people still supported a technocratic urban future, small groups of New Yorkers had begun to defend the human scale of their city in an organized way, a fight which led to the creation of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1965.[6] Community-based organizations like The Architects' Renewal Committee in Harlem (ARCH), founded in 1964, attempted to seize the tools of urban renewal from a handful of officials and demanded more community oversight.[7] And a new generation of urban theorists like Jane Jacobs questioned the slum clearance paradigm that had so dominated urban policy since the 1930s. The first New York World's Fair was aspirational, dreaming of a future that was only barely beginning to take shape. The second New York World's Fair, by comparison, refused to acknowledge the ways in which midcentury urbanism had not succeeded, and in doing so proposed a future in which Americans essentially stayed the course.

Multiple Cold War cultural ideas converged at the 1964 World's Fair. First, the ubiquitous display of domestic products, appliances, and home furnishings emphasized the "soft power" aspect of American industry.[8] Manufacturers, exhibitors, and in many cases politicians claimed that the availability and affordability of household goods demonstrated that a capitalist system offered Americans the most choice, the greatest comfort, and the highest standard of living in the world.[9] Second, the city itself was on display as an additional place for visitors to explore and spend money while they were in town for the fair; by 1964 decades of conscious reshaping of New York's physical and cultural landscape had resulted in new tourist destinations like the United Nations and Lincoln Center that communicated New York's global leadership in politics and the arts, providing, as the historian Samuel Zipp has described, "the visionary content" of urban renewal.[10] Last, support for midcentury urbanism suffused the fair's exhibits; among others, Robert Moses's "Panorama" celebrated the vastness of the city and implicitly endorsed the highway infrastructure that New York had developed in the inter-fair period; Walt Disney's "Magic Skyway" and "Carousel of Progress" gushed about the role cars and suburbs played in America's prosperity and influenced Disney's plans for his own eventual "permanent world's fair": EPCOT.[11] The "House of Good Taste" offered three model suburban housing designs that differed in aesthetic, but each confirmed the midcentury movement away from small, densely inhabited housing toward spacious, free-standing homes on large lots that fostered insular family life.[12]

The 1964 World's Fair attempted to celebrate this Cold War consensus about New York, but it was a consensus that was rapidly eroding. Robert Moses, who had so effectively harnessed urban renewal to empower his agencies and reshape the city in the years between the fairs, found himself professionally embattled by the 1960s. Throughout 1959 Moses faced charges of corruption from community groups, including the Citizens Union, the Metropolitan Council on Housing, and the Women's City Club, as well as increasing pushback from local residents against specific Title I projects. The Met Council on Housing even launched a leaflet campaign in 1959, declaring "For New York to Grow, Moses Must Go."[13] Moses struck back fiercely, describing his critics as "professional vomiters and mud-throwers, jealous and unhappy chairmen and secretaries of moribund civic societies with their excited, maggoty brains," yet the pressure continued and strained his relationship with Mayor Wagner.[14] Moses resigned from the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance in 1960, and shortly thereafter was appointed to chair the World's Fair Corporation.

Moses, who had also been heavily involved in the 1939 World's Fair, saw this new fair as providing essential income that would allow him to complete the construction of Flushing Meadows Park, a task he had begun in the 1930s.[15] Assuming leadership of the Fair Corporation could also potentially repair his image in a city that had grown increasingly critical of his projects and his methods. Moses's primary goal, then, was to maximize the fair's profitability. He and the other planners projected an attendance of 70 million people and a profit of $100 million,[16] an ambitious number that required the fair to run for two seasons and also prompted Moses to charge rent to exhibitors. Both of these practices violated the policies set by the Bureau of International Expositions (BIE), which meant that the New York World's Fair of 1964 would not be an officially sanctioned fair.[17]

Despite this setback, the fair's planners forged ahead, convinced that aggressive promotion of the fair would bring in the necessary number of visitors and provide profit not only to the Parks Department but to the city as a whole. In order to net the most economic benefit to the city, the fair had to bring in a significant number of out-of-town visitors, who would consequently not only visit the fair but also make use of New York's hotels, restaurants, and other attractions in conjunction with their visit. Advertisements for the fair appeared in all of the major national magazines, and six months in advance of the fair's opening, the 1963 Thanksgiving Day Parade's theme was "a salute to the 1964–1965 World's Fair," and was seen by a national audience of 60 million people.[18]

New York's civic leaders not only worked tirelessly to drum up interest in the fair; they also worked diligently to control the city's image. As Mayor Wagner noted, "The seventy million visitors who are coming won't just visit the Fair. . . . The city itself will be on display, and it should be the finest exhibit of the Fair."[19]

In addition to more funding and enforcement of litter laws, fair preparation also meant the metaphorical "cleanup" of the city. In the fall of 1963 the city cracked down on gays and lesbians by revoking liquor licenses for several gay bars.[20] Over a six month period in 1963, the city made 166 arrests for obscenity.[21] The increased policing of the city's queer community overlapped with the targeting of writers, comedians, and filmmakers for obscenity, and reinforced the adversarial relationship between New York's counterculture and its world's fair promoters and business boosters. Leading downtown figures including Allen Ginsberg, Julian Beck, and Diane di Prima led a march against obscenity regulations on the fair's opening day in 1964.[22] The poet Frank O'Hara gave voice to his disgust with this conflict in his 1964 poem, "Here in New York We Are Having a Lot of Trouble with the World's Fair." In it, he skewers the fair's attempt to whitewash the city's problems in pursuit of profit:

> The stink of the fire hydrant drifts up
> and rust
> flows down the streets.
> the Shakespeare Gardens in
> Central Park
> glisten with blood, waxen
> like apple
> blossoms and apple simultaneously. We are happy
> here
> facing the multiscreens of the IBM Pavilion.
> We pay a lot for our entertainment. All right,
> roll over.[23]

O'Hara was not the only New Yorker who resented the Fair Corporation's power and its desire to put forth a sanitized, conflict-free picture of the city. In 1964 New York City was embroiled in civil rights conflicts. In February veteran civil rights strategist Bayard Rustin, who had recently organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, organized a 450,000-student school boycott to call attention to New York's segregated schools. Harlem tenant organizer Jesse Gray satirized the idea of a world's fair by staging a one-day "World's Worst Fair" on 117th Street, where visitors could tour "two typical hovels" that exemplified Harlem's housing crisis. Press coverage noted the repeated use of the slogan, "We want a fair world, not a World's Fair," a sentiment echoed by a small group of women who picketed the fair later that week.[24]

The failure of urban planning to bridge gaps of inequality and create a society without want, which 1939's exhibits had suggested would be a central feature of the world of the 1960s, came literally to the fair's gates in 1964. In the weeks preceding the fair's opening, Brooklyn's branch of The Congress on Ra-

cial Equality (CORE) tried to upend the idea of the conflict-free, highway-bound city by plotting a "stall-in," whereby protesters would create gridlock on the Grand Central Parkway to raise awareness of New York's racist hiring practices, low minimum wage, segregated schools, and racially biased law enforcement.[25] CORE fliers called the fair "a symbol of American hypocrisy," declaring that "for the great steel Unisphere we submit our bodies . . . as witnesses to the tragedy of the northern ghetto."[26]

While the stall-in itself was ill-attended and was roundly dismissed in the mainstream media as "a wild-eyed, harebrained, crackpot scheme," other civil rights protests at the fair, like a picket at the Schaefer Beer Pavilion, were more successful.[27] Moreover, while the stall-in divided CORE's own leadership and was not officially sanctioned, the collective effect of civil rights activists' engagement with the fair served as a powerful reminder that civil rights was not only a southern problem. The issues raised in the spring of 1964 escalated and deepened over the course of the fair's run; that summer, Harlem erupted in violence after a police officer murdered James Powell, a black teenager. As civil rights protests grew, so did the backlash; at the beginning of the fair's second season, a group of white teenagers from East New York calling themselves SPONGE (The Society for the Prevention of Negroes Getting Everything) skirmished with a group of CORE protestors on the fairgrounds.[28]

In addition to the civil rights and free speech conflicts that colored 1963–1965, there was another struggle raging over New York's future, a struggle that in many ways was the most threatening of all to Robert Moses and the consensus around midcentury urbanism. The fair was for him a tool by which he would cement his legacy as New York's master builder and visionary urban planner.[29] Moses espoused midcentury urbanism actively; his career was a testament to slum clearance, road building, and fostering a seemingly inevitable linkage between New York City and its suburbs.

But over the years an opposition to this mode of urban planning had arisen. On the local level, in old communities like Brooklyn Heights and Greenwich Village, residents organized to fight the destruction of historic buildings and resist the construction of additional roadways.[30] Residents in Harlem fought for community input on urban renewal projects and criticized top-down discussions of the neighborhood's problems.[31] Architectural critics and urban theorists began to be more vocal in their condemnation of midcentury urbanism; the well-known architectural critic Lewis Mumford lamented in a 1958 letter to Jane Jacobs that "if anything survives this age it will be known, retrospectively, as the age of the wreckers and exterminators."[32] Jacobs herself provided some of the most compelling criticism in her 1962 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Moses referred to the book as "junk" to its publisher, Bennett Cerf, and was particularly angry at a "libelous" passage that criticized him as "negating

Fig. 6.1. GM Pavilion, containing "Futurama II," 1964 World's Fair. *Source*: New York Public Library Digital Archives.

the power of votes with the power of money."[33] Jacobs offered a resounding critique of the political structures that fueled midcentury urbanism and also provided an alternative urban vision, one that was essentially optimistic about the city's future. Instead of a crime-ridden, slum-infested place that needed to be torn down and placed in service to highways, Jacobs and her fellow preservation activists recognized that "lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration."[34]

This notion ran counter to the vision of the city presented at the fair. "Futurama II" echoed the arguments made by its predecessor; its display allowed visitors to see "a gigantic machine build a superhighway in the jungle, see barren desert become farmland, and hover above a futuristic metropolis of automated highways and moving sidewalks."[35] A future predicated on cars, massive consumption of resources, and decentralized living was alive and well all over the fair. The Ford Pavilion dazzled visitors with its Magical Skyway, which whisked them on a twelve-minute journey through time culminating with an aerial view of "The City of Tomorrow," which, like the model cities of the 1939 World's Fair, favored large-scale display and discouraged visitors from considering a pedestrian's-eye view of urban life.[36] Several other exhibits extolled the virtues

of suburban living, oil consumption, and the personal automobile, including the almost fetishistic display of cars on pedestals at the Chrysler Pavilion (see plate 2).

The 1964 World's Fair occurred at a moment of significant upheaval in New York. The fair was a powerful symbol of the establishment, a showpiece for corporate giants and urban leaders alike to bolster their claim to be bringing Americans a better future. Consequently it held enormous appeal to visitors but was also a focal point for protest. The pictures of midcentury urbanism promoted at the fair were undeniably popular; out of 51 million total visitors to the fair in its two seasons, 29 million went to the General Motors Pavilion, 2 million more than went to Michelangelo's *Piet*à at the Vatican Pavilion.[37] Both the General Motors and Ford Pavilions were consistently ranked by visitors as the top attractions.

In one sense these were impressive numbers, but in another they were disappointing, and indicative of a shift that was happening in American culture. Moses had projected 70 million visitors; the end result fell far short of that. While the 1939 World's Fair had lost money, returning only 40 cents on the dollars to its investors, the 1964 World's Fair had been an even greater loss, returning only half that amount.[38]

Because the fair was so eclectic, it can be hard to glean meaning from its lackluster attendance. Certainly some of it may be due to overly optimistic initial projections. As a number of newspaper articles from 1964 suggest, some of it may also have been due to potential fairgoers' wariness about the safety of coming to New York. But an undeniable factor in the fair's ambivalent reception was also the fact that much of what it presented had become commonplace, and, for some, repugnant. In 1964 and 1965 most fairgoers did not connect midcentury urbanism with racism, as CORE's picketers did. They did not see the city's efforts to entice tourists as an authoritarian crackdown on artists and queer New Yorkers, as Frank O'Hara did. They may not yet have consciously questioned what was lost when vast new complexes were built, as Jane Jacobs did. But these critiques were in the air, vocalized on the streets, and starting to appear with greater consistency in the media. A shift was under way, and it undermined the utopian authority of the fair's exhibitors and chiseled away at the popular consensus upon which the fair depended. As an editorial in *Life* magazine opined, "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?"[39]