

EXPO 67: A DESIGNERS' WORLD

Every world fair or exposition since the Crystal Palace's day has been a boon to designers of almost every kind. The promoters have been well aware of this, and rather resentful of it. They have no intention of going to such trouble and expense just to put on a sort of Designers' Benefit. Yet they need the designers, and there is not much they can do about it except hope that the content of their show will at least compete with the packaging in the visitors' eyes.

Before Expo 67 opened, the press of Montreal had moments of doubt about the balance of package and content. Everybody had been conscious from the beginning that this fair intended to be a serious thing. It vigorously dissociated itself from the New York World's Fair even before Mr. Moses' unofficial show fell so miserably flat on its face. Expo was to be non-commercial, an educational and cultural event.

Hence the pretty high-falutin theme, 'Man and His World', and all the sub-themes: Man the Provider, Man the Producer, and so on. Each of these sub-themes was given its own pavilion. These were distributed around the grounds, and being obviously related architecturally they helped to hold the whole show together and in cumulative effect were intended to be the equivalent of the Eiffel Tower, or the Space Needle, or the single central theme structure of other earlier fairs.

The theme and sub-theme started out as literary ideas. (The basic thought was in a quotation from Antoine de Saint - Exupery: "To be a man is to be convinced that one is taking a hand in building the world.")

Yet in the form or the contents of the giant structures which eventually represented the sub-themes it is rather hard to find anything that evokes the thoughts in the quotation. The structures are undoubtedly successful, but almost entirely as visual entertainments. These sub-theme pavilions are made of steel members of modest dimensions built up into enormous space-frames of generally tetrahedral form - each one is different - lined internally so that nearly all the steel is aggressively exposed to outside view. To symbolise the temporary nature of the pavilions (they are among those which will be demolished after Expo closes on October 28) the steel has been left without paint, patchily rusting. Intrepid visitors climbing stairs and entering some vast triangular gap in the side of a space-frame to gain admittance to one of these buildings find themselves in an architectural dream world. Rusted steel webs slope inwards to meet a hundred or more feet overhead. Rusted steel bridges or escalators span wide open spaces over dark water glimpsed far below. Sometimes the top is open to the sky, sometimes a huge pyramidal space soars above one's head into a gloomy unlighted heaven. It is as if one had taken 'Drink Me' and stepped inside the model of a keen student in the second year of a Pure Design course.

Suddenly in one of the roofed sections one comes across a space which is obviously devoted to exhibits. For instance, high in the 'Man the Producer' pavilion is a dark room of immeasurable dimensions on the irregular walls and ceilings of which are flashed a random series of random-sized still or moving pictures showing things produced by Man. Or you may hear water and find on investigation a deep well in the floor of a platform inside which plays a fountain, to be seen only from the top. Sometimes there is some actual hardware a few products set in a beautifully intricate plastic showcase, a glass-walled tank displaying a skin-diver demonstrating something to do with oceanography. Yet the actual exhibits, the intelligence conveyed by the content once you discover the content, is utterly dominated by the packages which have been provided by the various designers: architects and display men and industrial, typographical graphics and other specialists.

To us whose work and life is design this is all very exciting. There is much to study in the brilliant design of display cases, in the imaginative use of lights and concealed lighting, in multiple movies and 'op' effects, in the overall control of space and structure. Without question Expo 67 is a visual feast, and one which is organised enough not to become indigestible.

There are some techniques which are used so often as to become cliches. These include stroboscopic optical tricks and electronic music - which is everywhere while normal music is practically unheard and muzak is banished. Then there

are movies in triplicate. It is said that so many films are on view that a visitor doing nothing but watch one after another could not see them all during the six months life of Expo. This is without counting the numerous presentations of coordinated stills. And virtually none of these is presented on a single screen, nor even a double. Sometimes, as in the magnificent Czech pavilion, a whole wall mosaic of screens is used. But most frequently the number is three and they are arranged in horizontal line like old-style Cinerama except that they are frank about the two joints. Thus even in the movies the technique is nearly always more fascinating than the content. They are essentially designers' movies.

Yet the very freedom given to designers at a show like this is a trap endangering the cause of design. For when the package so obviously and heavily dominates the content, however you judge it in terms of size or cost or message or visual excitement - the final effect is inclined to be anti-climactic. A huge building may finish up as, literally, an empty gesture. Some unsympathetic hard-headed visitors might find the ultimate let down confirming their worst impressions of designers: impractical, airy-fairy people with heads in empty clouds.

This is not to suggest that packages are not important. At expositions they are, of course, unusually important. Yet one lesson of Expo is that they should be balanced by an impact of about equal strength in the intelligence they convey.

It is not directly the fault of any designer if he is not given adequate content by his clients, yet perhaps he should be warned by Expo to demand more content when he judges that his fine package is dominating too heavily what it has been asked to hold.

Expo 67, in short, is a designer's holiday romp. The pavilions of the host country are perhaps the most unbalanced in this regard, but in many parts the tendency prevails. Even when it does not, Expo still presents a designer's view of most of the participating countries.

With few exceptions each country mirrors in its Expo pavilion not what it is, not the opposite of what it is, not the Public Relations consultant's idea of what it is, not the popular press's idea of what might be most popular, but the designers' idea of how they would like to see that country. Thus France appears as a sophisticatedly complicated leader of technological design; Britain appears as a swinging, witty, egalitarian state; Russia is the polished, mature, smooth master of techniques in all the arts of living; Czechoslovakia is a humorous, lively, permissive, democracy; and Australia is apparently run by and for scientists and artists. (N. B. I exaggerate.)

Probably the best example of this, however, is the U. S. A. pavilion. Inside the truly magnificent plastic dome or near-sphere by Buckminster Fuller is a quite remarkable display designed by the well-known team of young, imaginative designers: The Cambridge Seven. What they have done is to make the U. S. A.

look not what it is, and not any of the other things mentioned above, and not what any imaginable American businessman or Senator visiting Expo would like to see. They have made it in something of the spirit of a huge New Yorker joke. It is more sophisticated than with-it; It is high camp (in the American sense) and off beat. Exhibits include a 1923 Yellow Cab presented without comment, 20 feet high portraits of Clark Gable and other stars of the early '30s in double-breasted suits, the American flag sliced into about a hundred pieces and hung as a swinging mobile.

American art is represented by a few huge neo-Pop paintings including one by Jim Dine about 25 feet high consisting of two vertical panels of red house paint, one slightly more red than the other, with the trade name and number of the tint scrawled at the bottom for the convenience of anyone interested. American technology is represented by a few little black iron household gadgets of last century: a bean slicer, a pea-sheller, a cherry-pipper, all operated by little handles. In the designers' world that is Expo 67 the U. S. A. pavilion is an esoteric private joke for designers.