

CENTENNIAL PAVILION
BALBOA PARK, SAN DIEGO
A Mark Dion project

Summary

The Centennial Pavilion is an iconic structure intended to function as a place of orientation, as a center which highlights the cultures of the park. While the pavilion itself is a structure of our time, the exterior celebrates the historic architecture and content of the Park as the interior demonstrates its riches and diverse opportunities. The Centennial Pavilion provides a significant and challenging solution to the Park and its community's pressing needs. It is, ultimately, a project worthy of the ambition of Balboa Park itself.

Statement

In 2015 Balboa Park and the City of San Diego will celebrate an auspicious centennial, that of the Panama-California Exposition. The 1915 exposition marked the wondrous opening of the Panama Canal and signaled a new era of hope and prosperity for the first American port to be reached by ships heading west through the locks. The Exposition itself was miraculous. With a population under 40,000, San Diego was the smallest city to ever stage an International Exposition. The event's success was matched by the even more elaborate 1935 World's Fair. The city plan, Balboa Park and its landscape, and the rich collection of buildings and cultural and scientific institutions represent the enduring legacy of the visionary events. How can we begin to commemorate and equal such significant contributions to the city's history?

A number of Balboa Park's cultural institutions are organizing landmark historical exhibitions, lectures and events to mark the centennial. While exceptional in scholarship and scope, these endeavors may seem anemic in the face of the scale of achievement of the original audacious events. The more I researched the two international expositions, the more convinced I became that timidity and historical academia were not the best tributes to the vision that made the Panama-California Exposition possible. My initial approach was two pronged: firstly a close reading into the needs of the park and the institutional landscape, followed by a close reading of the evolution, philosophy and epistemology of world's fair architecture. It is the modeling of the Pavilion itself, with its visionary form and maverick interior display technology, in which the essence of the world's fair phenomenon and its legacy is embodied.

The story of fantastical exhibition architecture begins long before that of world's fairs. Its origins can be traced to the tradition of garden folly architecture. These elaborate, idiosyncratic structures enriched great estates in the 16th and 17th centuries but reached a zenith of expression in the mid- 18th and early 19th centuries. While some estates were fortunate to feature classical or monastic ruins, other jealous gentry merely built their own picturesque versions. Classical temples joined Chinese pagodas, pyramids, Gothic ruins, grottos, rustic villages, tumbled-down abbeys and hunting

pavilions. Follies encouraged a type of time travel, evoked philosophical debate, or merely delighted the eye. While it is suggested that they were excessive ornaments, I would suggest that their purpose was discursive; they made meaning and crafted a situation.

The folly by nature is deceptive, claiming to be something they are not. They have also been influential sites of technical and design experimentation. The first Gothic Revival and Greek Revival structures in the UK were follies as were the first concrete buildings.

With allegorical functions, and formal experimentation the sensibility of the folly can also be witnessed in the fantastical and extreme architecture of amusement parks and zoos. The extreme style of Coney Island's Luna Park and numerous other such attractions can be viewed as the democratic bridge between the folly and world's fair pavilion. Indeed the interplay between high brow education and experimentation and popular amusements formed a central element of friction throughout the American heyday of international expositions.

World's fairs, universal expositions, expos—all a part of the tradition that 1915's Panama-California Exposition in San Diego and California Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco belong—evolve from the French agricultural exposition tradition and mature with the Crystal Palace-Great Exhibition of 1851. The great chain of fairs which leads to San Diego are: London 1851, New York 1853, Paris 1889, Chicago 1893, Buffalo 1901 and St. Louis 1904. These landmark public events emphasized new developments in industrialization, art and science. Steel and glass construction, the telephone, and electricity all debuted at world's fairs. The ideology of Modernism was introduced across the globe through world's fairs.

While we do not associate Balboa Park's first Exposition with novel industrial technology, it did feature cutting edge science in other fields. In particular, this was true for the disciplines of anthropology and ethnography, where a progressive anti-racist agenda confronted the pseudo-science of highbrow eugenics as well as popular bigotry. The 1935 fair was far more overtly future-minded and highlighted new approaches to urbanism and architecture. Both fairs were paragons in the promotion of regional values and specific histories rather than vague notions of internationalism. Indeed the 1915 event can be viewed regionally, as the Southwest United States' overt rejection of the cultural hegemony of the East Coast.

The story of marvelous architecture throughout the twentieth century is firmly anchored in the world's fair model. While fantastical pavilions were often constructed as temporary, they exemplify the most self consciously signifying structures ever produced. The architecture embodied at universal expositions expresses the paradox of being both utopian and visionary on one hand, and nostalgic on the other. These buildings represent the hopes, assumptions, insecurities, power projections and social agendas of a close collaboration between local power elites, the Federal Government, the State, corporations, and business leaders. The touchstone concerns of the twentieth century, modernism, industrialization, cultural exchange, new travel and communications

technologies, and national and corporate branding were all promoted and often introduced through world's fair pavilions and their exhibitions.

When traveling the road lined with fantastical architecture leading through San Diego, it is impossible not to detour at the home of Theodor Geisel. The imaginary architectural style of Dr. Seuss—San Diego's most famous and influential literary figure—is a delightful and non-rectilinear one. His droopy, round biomorphic towers, palaces, hovels, and factories with sharp stairs, long looping ramps, platforms, and buttresses embody his witty variety of anti-authoritarianism. They utterly defy authority, even the authority of gravity itself.

On repeated visits to Balboa Park in San Diego and through long and detailed discussions with curators, directors and educators, I became aware of the significant need for a single point of orientation for the park. The lack of a significant visitors center which services the array of cultural institutions and employs new technologies misses the critical opportunity to make a significant impact on the visitor in terms of their orientation to and participation in the rich diversity of activities in the Park.

The Centennial Pavilion is an iconic structure intended to function as a place of orientation, as a center which highlights the cultures of the park. Visitors come there to understand the activities, institutions, opportunities, communities and events that comprise the complex cultural landscape. The Centennial Pavilion will be the definitive source of information on exhibitions, performances, sporting events, nature walks, lectures, meeting of amateur enthusiast clubs, volunteer opportunities and parties. For the various institutions and groups the Pavilion will be a point of contact with a public that may not comprehend the scope and focus of the array of the Park's organizations. I imagine the Pavilion as a joyful, active space of wonder and home to many voices, but it is primarily a departure point to the broader Park and its institutions and activities.

The pavilion itself is a structure of our time. Every building embodies philosophical principles and this structure speaks to some of the paradoxes of this moment: one of positive trends such as the greater recognition of cultural diversity while it also acknowledges the extraordinary challenges to and anxieties about our environment. As with the tradition of fantastical architecture, the pavilion employs and experiments with new tools and technologies to push visual language. Its marvelous form and use of new technology and building methods consciously evokes the maverick tradition of world's fair pavilion architecture. The exterior architecture of the Centennial Pavilion integrates the two dominant themes of modern architecture, the grid and the biomorphic or organic. The grid displays on the exterior in silhouette what the interior reveals as an ordered, taxonomic display which celebrated the various museums' collection (a veritable cabinet of curiosity) and which embodies institutional enlightenment rationality. On the other hand, the hexagonal building is surmounted with a biomorphic, "melting" roof structure which expresses the irrational side of nature. The Centennial Pavilion's footprint is that of the hexagon, one of nature's building blocks present in crystalline formation and insect architecture. Symbolically—since it is associated with the honey

bee hive cell—the geometric shape here represents the collective endeavor and cooperation of the Park's constituents.

The interior features exhibition space which can also double as performance space. Seen above in the cabinet displays are a collection of institutional masterpieces drawn from the visual arts, natural history, the physical sciences and material culture. Below the dual space showcases the extraordinary scope of institutional collections from lush and surreal vegetation to artistic accomplishments, from skilled performance to engineering perfection and the historic culture of the everyday. It is also a place where music and theater can field test and experiment with smaller audiences. While at the center of the structure is an orientation kiosk, the museum display space and performance space may be used for recitals, rehearsals, poetry readings, exhibition highlights, site-specific theater, demonstrations, try outs, projections, private functions, lectures and spoken word events, live animal demonstrations, inter-institutional collaborations, and even receptions. In sum, the Pavilion's architecture and contents highlight innovation, creativity and the Park's central role as San Diego's repository and caretaker of its memory and culture.

There remains a great deal to develop and discuss in taking this proposal to the next stage. However some of the most critical aspects are clear. There is an urgent need to commemorate the centennial of the Panama-California Exposition with an endeavor of significance. There has long been a lack of an appealing and iconic orientation site within the park. There exist countless rich opportunities and a great willingness for collaboration within the family of the organizations of the Park. These conditions and desires are manifested in the design, use and symbolism of the Pavilion. The Centennial Pavilion provides a significant and challenging solution to the Park and its community's pressing needs. It is, ultimately, a project worthy of the ambition of Balboa Park itself.

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