DEFINING THE MODERN METROPOLIS: UNIVERSEXPOSITIONS FROM THE MID-NINETEENTH TO THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

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I. Introduction

In this lecture, I wish to analyze the emergence of the standards defining a modern metropolis and the role that universal expositions — also referred to as world’s fairs — played in this process. While a true metropolis plays a central role in setting these standards, it is sufficient for a world city — a quality ascribed to Imperial Berlin time and again — to live up to these. If we take Christopher Bayly’s definition of modernity as “an aspiration to be ‘up with the times’,” then the claim of world’s fairs to universality was more than just pretentious. The standards set by the universal expositions, and discussed intensely in numerous congresses connected with them, were accepted far beyond Europe and the United States. Huge exhibitions in Constantinople and Cairo in the 1860s, to offer an early example, clearly copied the models of world’s fairs in London and Paris. Still, for most of the second half of the nineteenth century these were largely European affairs before the United States began to play a dominant role towards the end of the century. Quite often centenaries of national significance prompted these huge exhibitions, as in the case of Philadelphia in 1876, Paris in 1889 or in Buenos Aires, where one hundred years of independence were celebrated in 1910. Since the interwar years, universal expositions lost some of their earlier importance, and the discussion about the standards for a modern metropolis was taken over by ever more specialized congresses and expositions, a process that clearly had begun during the second half of the nineteenth century but now accelerated considerably.

Town planning in 1910 is a case in point. When the Universal City Planning Exhibition in Berlin opened its gates in May 1910, a number of its participants had just visited the Ninth International Housing Congress in Vienna. And similarly, in September and October of the same year, some participants of the International City Planning...
exhibition in Düsseldorf moved on to a parallel event at the Royal Academy in London. In both cities, the original drawings by Jules Guérin for the 1909 Plan of Chicago by Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett were the star attractions. Likewise, the contributions to the competition for a Greater Berlin were displayed and discussed in Boston and other North American cities. What had been integrated into the world’s fairs during the 1850s and 1860s, where model houses for the working classes had been displayed, for example, was now relegated to expert discussions in an intense transatlantic dialogue.

In what follows I would like to invite you on a brief journey to the sites of a few important universal expositions. Given the time constraints, this journey will at best be an appetizer leaving aside many fascinating expositions such as the two world’s fairs organized in Barcelona in 1888 and 1929 which, in addition to the Olympic Games of 1992, transformed one of Europe’s most attractive cities. Instead I will begin with the earliest expositions in London and Paris, whose crucial importance for defining a modern metropolis cannot be in doubt, before turning to two late-nineteenth-century exhibitions in the second part of this lecture. These still displayed the characteristics summarized by Georg Simmel in 1896, when his visit to the industrial exposition in Berlin prompted the following reflections: “It is a particular attraction of world’s fairs that they form a momentary center of world civilization, assembling the products of the entire world in a confined space as if in a single picture.” This is no longer true today, and I would be surprised if a majority of you were aware that there is a world exposition in Milan going on while we are in this room. Rather than taking the story to the present, I will conclude with a look at developments following the last major Paris world exposition in 1937.

II. From London (1851) to Paris (1855/1867) with a brief stop in Vienna (1873)

Marx and Engels had been less generous than Simmel when they commented on the plans for the Great Exhibition of Works of Industry of All Nations in London in 1851 — commonly accepted as the first world’s fair. They interpreted it as “conclusive proof of the concentrated power with which great industry suppresses national boundaries everywhere.” In their view, the presentation of industrial products equaled “a great exam” in which the countries of the world were to demonstrate “how they had used their time.” The productive forces as standards of universal development that Marx and Engels


7 Quoted from the translation in Alexander C.T. Geppert, Fleeting Cities. Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe (Basingstoke, 2010), 327.

alluded to were clearly visible even if some ways of displaying things may irritate us today. In many ways, Joseph Paxton’s enormous Crystal Palace itself was the most impressive and the most telling industrial object.

Made up of thousands of identical elements, the Palace made clear that it could not have been built without the most recent machine tools. Nor could it, without these tools, have been taken down after the closure of the exhibition and re-erected as a commercial amusement center in another part of the city. Georg Simmel may have had the Crystal Palace in mind when, in 1896, he characterized exhibition architecture as transitory, stressing, however: “Because this fact is unequivocally imprinted on it, the buildings do not at all seem unstable.” At the time, the dominant building materials — iron and glass — were associated primarily with the construction of railway stations — themselves symbols of the modern age.

The architecture of the Crystal Palace certainly contributed to the attraction of the London event, which counted more than six million visitors. Accessible for one shilling once a week, it drew a socially diverse crowd, which included the “respectable” working class. Travel agencies organized visits across the United Kingdom, so that it seems fair to talk about the beginnings of mass tourism. For most of these visitors, among whom the number of foreign visitors — estimated at around 40,000 — remained limited, it was probably their first visit to London. London was keen to improve its attractions by extending the...
opening hours of the British Museum and postponing the summer holiday closures of the National Gallery as well as more commercial enterprises like Madame Tussaud’s, the zoo and the music halls. The contemporary debate reflected the rift between the serious, educational intentions of the organizers around Prince Albert and the visitors’ demands for entertainment and consumption. In the short run, this conflict crystallized in the struggle over the future of the Crystal Palace. While Prince Albert succeeded in channeling the financial surplus of the exhibition into educational institutions on its former South Kensington site, commerce and amusement venues were moved to Sydenham, where the new name of the re-erected building — the People’s Palace — emphasized that these were very popular demands. The tension between education and entertainment was a recurring one at later universal fairs. Those who lamented the overarching role of commerce and entertainment were usually unaware, however, that addressing an undifferentiated mass of consumers helped to hide inequalities since these expositions sidelined working class interests, relegated women to separate pavilions, and treated non-white people as colonial subjects.

One aspect that was not yet dominant in the London exhibition of 1851 was the conscious exposition of the modernity of the city itself. In this respect, the Parisian expositions of the 1850s and 1860s introduced a new quality because they coincided with — or rather were part of — the rebuilding of Paris under Napoléon III and Georges Haussmann.

Contemporaries did not fail to notice this connection: “Talking about the Paris world’s fair,” Franz Reuleaux noticed in 1867, “one has to consider the way in which Paris has displayed itself as well.” The connection between the exposition and the city’s rebuilding can be traced on several levels. For one, there was a personal link since Haussmann was a member of the imperial commission in charge of the preparations for the 1867 exposition, and some of his close collaborators like Jean-Charles-Adolphe Alphand were responsible for the shaping of the grounds for the exhibition. Also, there was a spatial connection because the most prominent building of the 1855 Paris Exposition, the Palais de l’Industrie, had been built on the Champs-Élysées. And finally, the timing of many innovations was telling. Both the opening of the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont and of the reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale were scheduled on the official inauguration day of the Exposition Universelle. The same timing was planned for the

10 The secondary literature is documented in Lenger, Metropolen, 29-34.
opening of the new opera house, which was, however, not completed in time.

Similarly, tour boats on the Seine and new horse-drawn bus lines began operations, forming a central part of Haussmann’s program to facilitate the circulation of people and commodities throughout the city. His boulevards contributed to this agenda by forming new axes in hitherto densely built quarters and by clearly separating pedestrians from traffic on broad, newly paved avenues. Earlier in 1867, the central slaughterhouse in La Villette had been completed and later in the same year, Belgrand’s system of water pipes started to provide Parisian households with fresh drinking water from the distant Champagne. As witnessed by the battle cry of early housing reform — more light, more air — contemporaries believed that diseases stemmed from miasma, dangerous evaporations best avoided by draining the urban environment. Accordingly, disposing of wastewater was even more important than bringing fresh water into the city. Paris, like London, had fallen victim to cholera epidemics repeatedly in the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus it should not surprise us that its modern sewer system was much admired by visitors. The Russian tsar, Alexander II, and the Prussian king, William I, were among those who participated in the popular underground boat tours on offer during the world’s fair of 1867. This is understood more readily if one realizes that the Parisian sewers did not at first replace the cesspools, but transported only rain and household waste water. Another prominent feature of the improvement of urban hygiene and health pursued by Haussmann was the creation of parks. He himself called them “green lungs,” and one of them — the Bois de Vincennes — later became the site of the second modern Olympics in 1900.
Paris in 1867 offered much of what people came to expect of a modern metropolis in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century. It was healthier than many other urban centers, considering that cholera-ridden cities like Marseille, Hamburg, Kiev or Naples still lacked efficient sewer systems in the 1880s, 1890s or, in the latter two cases, in the immediate prewar years. In addition, its distances could be traversed relatively quickly. In the late 1850s, more than 100 million rides per year on one of the city’s horse drawn buses indicated that at least the better-off Parisians did so quite often. But the modern metropolis was not only healthy and fast-paced, it was also expected to be well planned. Again, competitors admitted that Paris set standards in that respect, too. Thus the British journal *The Builder* noticed a few months before the opening of the 1867 world’s fair: “The British capital is far behind the French in general effect of architecture in streets and public places.”

If there was any city which could rival the French capital in this respect, it was Vienna. And it is revealing to ask why. The rebuilding of central Vienna could only take on the uniform character many contemporaries praised because Emperor Franz Joseph not only ordered the demolition of its walls and fortifications in late 1857, but also claimed them as his possessions. Simplifying slightly, given the far-reaching property rights typical for nineteenth-century Europe, one might argue that large-scale urban planning could only be realized in a neoabsolutist system or through bonapartist rule, which conveyed extensive rights of expropriation. Therefore it should not surprise us that while Paris might have been surpassed by some German cities with regard to urban hygiene by 1914 and while American cities repeatedly outdid Paris when it came to the construction of urban parks, the French capital was still a marvel to those valuing a uniform urban landscape in the interwar years. Incidentally, the debt Haussmann incurred for the rebuilding of Paris was not paid off until the interwar years.

Apart from a certain family resemblance with regard to urban planning, Vienna and Paris also shared being sites of universal expositions. The Vienna fair of 1873, however, was an ill-fated event because it coincided with both the economic depression of that year and a severe cholera epidemic. Thus, besides a deficit of many millions, the Prater was more or less the only thing that remained of the exhibition; it stands for popular amusement parks to this day. A final look at the Paris world’s fair of 1867 can show us what its eleven

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Le Play’s educational intentions may well have lost out to the entertainment and consumption needs of his visitors: “Every unsuccessful establishment has been turned into a restaurant,” one report noted as early as July 1867. His intention to offer such a broad range of objects and services within the exhibition that there was no need for its visitors to ever leave it turned out to be illusionary, however. Instead, the city itself was again an attraction at least equal to the world’s fair it staged. Most visitors — like the 12,000 Englishmen for whom Thomas Cook had built a hotel in Paissy — stayed in places far away from the exhibition grounds and visited restaurants or theaters everywhere. Admission to the city’s museums was free, and the department stores that were such a prominent part of the modernization of the urban landscape vied for customers with credit slips. To many a visitor, the numerous aristocrats present were as attractive as the city or the exhibition itself. The fact that they were treated as modern celebrities is indicated by an anecdote reported by Siegfried Kracauer. Hortense Schneider, who sang the leading part in Jacques Offenbach’s “The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein,” was driven to the entrance of the world’s fair. Upon being told that only princes and princesses were allowed entry, she successfully insisted on being admitted by saying: “Make way! I am the Grand Duchess of Gerolstein!”

III. From Paris (1889) to Chicago (1893)

Later world’s fairs shared many basic characteristics with the early ones in London and Paris. Part of this continuity was the ambition to surpass all predecessors. Although the 27.5 million visitors of the
1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago fell short of the 32 million that had visited the Paris world’s fair four years earlier, at an expanse of 686 acres the White City could at least claim to have been much larger. To some contemporaries it seemed, however, as if the format had passed its zenith. Werner Sombart, who had been in Paris in 1889 as representative of the Bremen chamber of commerce and had been a member of the German delegation to the scholarly congress staged at the 1904 St. Louis world’s fair, looked back in 1908 saying: “And it almost seemed as if in 1889 the exposition had in every way reached its end, as the symbol of modern culture — the Eiffel tower — had been erected, and with the jubilee exhibition a truly unsurpassed brilliant event had been realized.” While Sombart could hardly be expected to do justice to American exhibitions, his reference to the Eiffel Tower carried some weight. After the construction of the Crystal Palace, no single structure served as an equally powerful symbol of the machine age.

While greeted as a triumph of engineering, the Eiffel tower proved to be politically divisive. In France, the Catholic press attacked it as the dreadful phallic skeleton of a new tower of Babel while collaborators of its architect did not shy away from contrasting it to the unspeakable sadness of Sacré-Coeur. Since Sacré-Coeur was the pious and conservative response to the revolutionary Commune, it was clear that the Eiffel tower was central to the debate on the legacy of the French Revolution. The connection between the world’s fair and the centenary of the revolution had also been the reason for Great Britain, Russia, and Germany to decline participation, as did Austria-Hungary and Italy, the latter two citing prohibitive costs. Nevertheless, the exhibition turned out to be an undisputed success; at least in part because the exhibition enhanced what people had come to expect of world’s fairs: a spacious, impressive Galeries des Machines and buildings that bore witness to the close cooperation of architects and engineers in the use of iron and glass.

What set the world’s fair of 1889 apart from earlier ones was above all the space it devoted to the colonial exhibition. A colonial section had been included since 1855, but now it not only occupied a place of its own, but it was also linked to an exhibition on human habitation across all cultures and time periods housed along the Quai d’Orsay. While this exposition reserved the history of architecture for the “white race,” the presentation of colonial peoples followed a similar logic. Beat Wyss is right in speaking of exhibitions “of
the colonial powers contrasting the achievements of technological progress with colonized subjects displayed in customary lodgings mashing corn, carving wood, and dancing. The Eiffel tower,” he continues, “symbolized the superiority of Europe over the shabby negro huts of the Khanak and Senegalese.”

Blatant racism was not limited to the exhibition on human habitation, but extended to popular representations of indigenous people as well. Among these, the “Street of Cairo” first presented in Paris in 1878, which became a standard item of world’s fairs well into the twentieth century, was the most successful. On the one hand, it had pretensions to authenticity by employing 250 people mostly from Egypt, among them the especially popular donkey drivers. On the other hand, the placement of a Javanese village and the display of arts and crafts from Siam on the same street made it obvious that authenticity was not the main concern. A group of Egyptian scholars on their way to the Stockholm congress of orientalists of 1889 were highly irritated.

Their irritation might have been even stronger had they known that the Egyptian government had given material and financial support to the enterprise. Four years later, a “Street of Cairo” was again displayed as part of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago and comprised, among many other things, a Chinese and a Japanese tea house, an English pub, Scottish bagpipers and a Buffalo Bill show.

In Chicago, a Colored American Day meant to assuage well-founded concerns about the representation of Africans and African Americans instead provoked racist commentary, racism being an especially explosive issue in Chicago.

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26 See Wyss, Bilder, 193.
27 See Böger, Envisioning, 139f.; see. ibid., 109-172 for the following.
Two areas in particular captured the imagination of visitors to the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. One was architecture, the other electricity. Especially the architecture of the “White City,” as the site selected by Frederick Law Olmsted situated in Jackson Park, seven miles south of downtown Chicago, came to be called remained controversial. On the one hand, its huge neo-classical buildings, uniformly painted white, created a visual splendor that impressed almost every visitor. On the other hand, Daniel Burnham’s design disappointed the expectations of those who expected something more akin to the modernist, functionalist architecture typical of the Chicago Loop. Siegfried Giedion coined the term “mercantile capitalism,” and Hermann Muthesius summarized the verdict of most European critics: “To the astonishment of the world, Chicago, from which contemporary events were expected, had nothing better to do than to hang the familiar, antique disguises over the iron skeletons of its exhibition halls. Perhaps the fairy picture which was created was bewitching, but for artistic progress this regressive performance scored no more than zero.”

Regressive or not, visitors were simply stunned, especially so if they experienced the exhibition at night. Electricity and architecture were thus integrated, and the hundreds of thousands of light bulbs were easily interpreted as revealing “new ideas and truths which should enlighten and bless the world.” “Though Chicago was not the first world’s fair which had a separate building devoted to electricity,” electricity dominated the exhibition in new ways. In addition to the blinding splendor of the illumination and the giant Edison Tower, dynamos were everywhere. Electricity powered the giant Ferris wheel that lifted up to 2,000 riders 264 feet above the exhibition grounds as well as the moving sidewalk also shown in Paris seven years later. The centrality of electricity was apposite because it played a far more important role in Chicago than it did in any European city of the late nineteenth century. The use of the telephone was far more widespread here and the numerous elevators servicing office buildings impressed visitors of the Chicago world’s fair immensely.

Transport was key. Most visitors arrived by cable car, by Charles Yerkes’ new fast flying ‘El’ train, or in one of the Illinois Central’s open ‘cattle cars,’ which made the trip from the Loop to the fairgrounds in twelve minutes. But all the guidebooks agreed that the most delightful way to go was by lake steamer. The World’s Fair Steamship Company ran a fleet of twenty-five steamers from its midtown dock,

28 Cited in: Lewis, Early Encounter, 190; see Böger, Envisioning, esp. 119.
29 Cited in: Böger, Envisioning, 130.
30 Böger, Envisioning, 128; see ibid., passim.
31 See Lewis, Early Encounter, 92f. and 148.
and for a fifteen-cent fare, passengers were treated to band music and a “continuous panoramic picture (of) the best built and busiest city in the world” — as one advertisement had it.32 Thus in Chicago, too, fair and city were linked more closely than the rather distant location of Jackson Park might have suggested. The trip required to get to the fairground provided the opportunity to showcase both the city at large and its modernized transportation system, from which the city benefitted for years to come and which displayed characteristics that still seemed futuristic in continental Europe at the dawn of World War I. In the end, the various European underground systems introduced or electrified since the 1890s proved better suited to metropolitan needs, however.

It is by no means clear that Chicago’s Columbian Exposition succeeded in making its Parisian predecessor look like “a mere village fair next to the colossal [Chicago] exhibition.”33 What did become clear, however, is that Sombart’s doubts about the future of the universal exposition as a medium were not unfounded. Although the Paris world’s fair of 1900 registered a record high of 50 million visitors, it was generally considered lackluster.34 No longer held together by a clear concept of modern development, the medium of the universal exposition disintegrated. In Chicago, scholarly congresses no longer were an integral part of the exposition, but were organized on a different site as a separate event instead. The practice of holding universal expositions in conjunction with the modern Olympics, first pioneered in Paris in 1900 and repeated more than once since then, did not rejuvenate the format of the world’s fair either. Moreover, the prominence of colonial subject matter at world’s fairs had much more resonance in the largest imperial countries than elsewhere, and even there the way the colonies were presented came increasingly under attack in the interwar years.35

IV. From Paris (1937) to Rome (1942/1960)

To be sure, none of this means that the debate about and the competition for modern standards had come to an end, nor that the modern metropolis and its infrastructure had lost its central place within it. The Moscow Metro opened in 1935 and, impressive in its monumentality to this day, would be a case in point. In fact, competing claims for modernity and superiority characterized the decades following World War I. The photographs of the German and Soviet pavilions at the Paris world exposition of 1937 document that the pavilions

32 Cited in Böger, Envisoning, 118; on Yerkes and his business practices see also Blair A. Rubble, Second Metropolis. Pragmatic Pluralism in Gilded Age Chicago, Silver Age Moscow, and Meiji Osaka, (Washington, DC, 2001), 145-155.
33 Cited in: Lewis, Early Encounter, 168.
34 See Geppert, Fleeting Cities, esp. 97.
35 See ibid., 198ff.
were perceived as part of a competition between fascism, in either its Italian or German guise, on one side and Stalinist communism on the other. The not very different pavilions stood to the right and to the left of the Palais de Chaillot, a monumental building in the neoclassical style housing the French exhibits, thus demonstrating that the liberal democracy hosting the 1937 world’s fair would not yield to the competing dictatorships.36 Among these dictatorships, Italian fascism served as a model of sorts for both Moscow and Berlin with respect to urbanism and architecture. Boris Mihailovich Iofan, who designed the unrealized Palace of the Soviets was one of the leading cultural ambassadors between Rome and Moscow; and the architects in Hitler’s entourage closely studied both Mussolini’s restructuring of Rome and the architecture of newly founded Italian towns.37

With regard to Rome, it was the creation of huge squares and the centralization of traffic that impressed Albert Speer and his colleagues, more than the new monumental buildings as such. In part, this may have been due to the fact that the buildings were quite often found on the periphery and that they occasionally had a far more modern appearance than anyone familiar with National Socialist architecture would expect. Mussolini’s plans required the demolition of inner city quarters on a scale comparable to Haussmann’s rebuilding of Paris. The most spectacular example certainly was the rapidly realized

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36 See Lenger, Metropolen, 318f.
breakthrough of the Via Impero, which now connected the Piazza Venezia with the Colosseum.\textsuperscript{38} Since Mussolini’s headquarters were located on the Piazza Venezia, this breakthrough served two purposes at once. On the one hand, the new axis was constructed as the main transport route for the masses needed for the regime’s propaganda events. On the other hand, and more symbolically, it was meant to connect fascist rule to the ancient Roman Empire. As Mussolini put it: “Rome is our point of origin and reference; it is our symbol, or, if you want to say so, our myth. We dream of a Roman Italy, that is, a wise and strong, disciplined and imperial Italy.”\textsuperscript{39} Mussolini’s Rome was to impress with central axes and big squares, just as Germania, the planned capital of National Socialist Germany, was meant to be dominated by two monumental north-south and east-west axes.

In Rome, as in Berlin, the regime’s self-representation was not limited to architecture and urban design. Rome competed successfully to stage yet another universal exposition. Since the late 1920s, the decision fell under the jurisdiction of an International Bureau, which later in 1936 — despite the recent cruel war against Ethiopia — awarded the 1941 world’s fair to Italy. A short time later, the Bureau even agreed to its postponement, to 1942, so that the Esposizione Universale di Roma (EUR) could also function as the official celebration of twenty years of fascist rule. In a certain sense, the EUR was a defensive move prompted by the enormous success Hitler had enjoyed with the 1936 Olympics. As host of the 1934 world soccer championship, Fascist Italy had some experience in hosting international events in order to gain international respect, and it had been among the candidates for hosting the 1936 Olympic Games. Losing to Berlin was a blow to Mussolini, whose political style has been characterized as “political athleticism.”\textsuperscript{40} The Esposizione Universale di Roma planned for 1942 was supposed to make up for this defeat. Its site was not to be in the city center, however. Instead, the exhibition grounds were part of the plan to redirect Rome’s development towards the sea. Due to the outbreak of World War II, construction soon came to a halt. Most buildings were completed after the war, however. Virgilio Testa replaced Mussolini’s chief architect Marcello Piacentini as the leading figure, but Piacentini’s ideas still guided the undertaking: “Just imagine,” he had written early in 1937 to the organizer of the EUR, “you were standing in the middle of the Forum Romanum . . . and would see in the background the colosseum to the left and the capitol to the right — analogous classical vision . . . but modern, highly modern!”\textsuperscript{41}


\textsuperscript{39} Cited in: Gustav Seibt, \textit{Rom oder Tod. Der Kampf um die italienische Hauptstadt} (Berlin, 2001), 299.


In the 1950s, a sports palace was added to the EUR area and the whole ensemble served as the site for the 1960 Olympic Games. Two conclusions suggest themselves: In some ways, the Olympic Games have replaced the world’s fairs as attractions of worldwide significance. But while the Olympics continue to be used as means of modernizing the infrastructure and enhancing the status of their host cities, they do not define the modern metropolis in the way the early world’s fairs did. The second conclusion is equally obvious. Universal expositions and, later, Olympic Games have always been part of international politics, providing recognition for the host country. In 1960, this recognition took the form of readmitting Italy to the world of international sports on a site that its architect, Piacentini, had planned to use for a Rassegna dell’Asse — an exposition of the axis powers — after World War II had ruled out the possibility of a world’s fair. Finally, it is well known that Japan and Germany hosted Olympic Games in 1964 and 1972 respectively, thus completing the readmittance of the former axis powers to more than just the world of sports.