

Experiencing Expos

An Oral History of U.S. Citizens' Engagement
with World's Fairs, 1962–2017



1964 New York World's Fair | PLCjr / CC BY-SA 2.0

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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For many U.S. citizens who have engaged with International Expositions, also known as World's Fairs, within the United States and overseas in the past 60 years, those experiences impacted simultaneously their worldviews, their views of their communities, and their sense of themselves. This paper reflects findings from an oral history that was conducted between September 2021 and January 2022 with 46 narrators representing both U.S. citizens who experienced Expos inside of the United States (1962-1984) and those who represented the United States at Expos held abroad as a USA Pavilion Youth Ambassador (2010-2017). Through their interviews and learning more about their experiences, we can better understand the long-standing socio-cultural impact of these events on U.S. citizens.

The United States has participated in Expos since 1851 and has hosted a dozen of them, including 11 recognized by the Bureau of International Expositions (BIE), a treaty-based international organization based in Paris, France, that regulates Expos. The United States Information Agency (USIA) provided program management and funded U.S. participation in Expos until it closed the Exhibitions Office in 1992, seven years before USIA merged with the U.S. Department of State. The U.S. Congress restricted the use of appropriated funds for USA Pavilions at Expos beginning in 1992 and the United States withdrew from the BIE in 2001. The United States was often able to arrange pavilions, at varying levels, after 1992 through donations from

private partners, but did not have pavilions at Expo 2000 Hannover or Expo 2008 Zaragoza. Commentators observe that this has come with a cost to prestige, relations between nations, and public and commercial diplomacy. In 2017, the U.S. Department of State established an Expo Unit to improve operations after a 25-year gap in program management. That year, the United States also rejoined the BIE to support a campaign to bring an Expo back to U.S. soil.

Given these events, this oral history research was designed to illuminate the lived experiences of people of the United States with Expos in the past 60 years and it provides much to consider. While some of the structural legacies of the Expos in Seattle (1962), New York City (1964-65), San Antonio (1968), and New Orleans (1984)—four of the last ones hosted inside the United States—are well established, the “felt” legacies of these major events are underexplored but no less powerful. All narrators were looking to Expos for an opportunity to learn about the world. While most of their experiences were overwhelmingly positive, the natural course of the conversations included the narrators’ highlights, what they saw as challenges, and how they would like to imagine U.S. investment in Expos moving forward. Since most of the narrators are strongly invested in seeing greater U.S. participation in future Expos, they took the opportunity to express their ideas on how the United States can be represented in the future. The key findings follow.



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For Narrators who Experienced Expos Inside the United States (1962-1984)

- Narrators expressed a common sentiment that it was as if the world came to them when they could not travel the world.
- Several narrators attributed the beginnings of their careers, significant advancements in their careers, or the lifelong encouragement to be curious and seek education to their experiences at Expos.
- For many who worked at the Expos, these experiences were seminal in their lives. For those for whom the Expos were not seminal, they were still significant enough to remember. Narrators said that the events created a shared experience; almost everyone remembered who they went with.
- Most felt that exposure to different things (such as technology and cultures) at Expos made “difference” a little less scary for people, made the rest of the world feel less foreign, and made people from the United States feel more confident in exploring and experiencing new and different cultures.
- The Expos provided a fundamental opportunity for the host cities to introduce and/or reinvent themselves, both nationally and internationally. Narrators reported that they inspired a sense of collective accomplishment and pride.
- The physical presence of the Expos forever changed the landscapes of the narrators’ cities, leaving enduring landmarks still famous today. In the case of San Antonio, however, there was also some displacement of communities with the removal of a neighborhood to build HemisFair Park under the name of urban renewal. In the case of Seattle, narrators noted stories of exclusion of minority communities, and questions about the intended local audience of the Expos.
- Nearly all the narrators supported the United States

hosting Expos in the future but advised that future Expos be reimagined to fit the current world. This re-envisioning included these sentiments:

- More inclusivity, a more honest depiction of countries and host cities, more open conversations, and potential collaborations on addressing past harms and finding innovative solutions to common issues.
- Intentionally recognizing diverse figures in Expo exhibits, along with leveraging Expos to help further social justice efforts.
- The possibility of sustainability instead of temporary installations.
- The potential for spreading the economic benefit across the host cities.
- The need to create more impactful person-to-person interactions.
- The importance of U.S. Government support and federal investment to ensure this inclusivity, accessibility, and sustainability for the U.S. communities that host them.

For Narrators who Represented the United States at Expos as Youth Ambassadors (2010-2017)

- All these narrators were deeply curious individuals committed to traveling and working abroad and having a new experience. Each former Youth Ambassador interviewed believed that their experience was a key moment within a trajectory that allowed them to gain a new level of self-awareness and cross-cultural fluency.
- The experience of being an “ambassador” helped catalyze and cement a more self-aware idea of what being an “American” is and how other publics

perceive “Americans,” alongside the realization that people from the United States are in constant “ambassadorships” through their actions and opinions. Some narrators shared that they felt proud to help complicate the idea of what an “American” is in the minds of those from elsewhere.

- The narrators expressed yearning for more nuanced, thoughtful presentations of the United States within the USA Pavilions, to better reflect the national story and the positive ways in which U.S. history and national aspirations can impact others.
- The narrators want to ensure that there is continual thoughtfulness and improvement for the Youth Ambassador experience. With Youth Ambassadors’ physical presence and role at USA Pavilions at Expos, the United States has a special opportunity to embody and express core national values. Future Expos should continue to strive to be more inclusive and representative as a means of providing a better understanding of U.S. society, the national story, and the country’s potential for the future.

Commonalities

- Among all 46 narrators, there was consensus that U.S. participation in Expos should be more robust, but also reimagined to offer something unique and to capitalize on the country’s greatest soft power assets: its values, its innovations, and its people.
- Narrators in both cohorts thought the U.S. Government should support Expos more, both to improve the experience for participants, attendees, and communities, and to signal U.S. involvement in and commitment to the event. Federal investment for USA Pavilions can also aid in planning to prioritize inclusiveness and accessibility.
- There was almost unanimous consensus that these events matter—and that they may matter even more going forward. Expos can help identify how different countries/communities are attempting to address difficult issues and may lead to brainstorming and participation in international collaboration to address universal issues, such as climate change.

There is a great deal to take from this paper and the interviews. In the face of rapidly shifting geopolitics, Expos can provide critical platforms for the United States to illuminate its national values to international audiences and highlight its greatest soft power assets: its values and its citizens. Looking to the future, there is also an opportunity to rethink how the United States can bring Expos back to its own soil and do so in a more inclusive way that showcases the country’s diversity as part of its democratic strength.



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