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# Experiencing Expos

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

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# Executive Summary

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 are as follows:

## 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 experienced the Expo 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.

This paper is not intended to be—nor should it be received as—an exhaustive or authoritative take on the United States' history with Expos. Oral histories seek to explore the lived experiences of individuals, defined here as “narrators.” This study does not cover the depth and breadth of recent Expos in and outside the United States. Rather, it was created to contribute to how we think about the impact of this work on individuals and communities, and on the role of the United States in the world. Our hope is that this project will help foster a greater understanding of these mega-events, the ways in which they represent and affect us, and their potential for continued evolution. We encourage readers to study this paper alongside the wealth of additional research on the subject; to that end, we have included a reading list with suggested resources.

# The Report

**Introduction**

**Methodology**

**Experiencing Expos Inside the United States**

**Experiencing Expos Overseas as a Youth Ambassador**

## Introduction

For 170 years, people have gathered at World Expos (or International Registered Exhibitions), to share cultural and economic innovations that define their global contributions and place in the international system. The Expos' purpose, according to the Bureau of International Expositions (BIE), their governing body, is for these nations to come together to find "solutions to pressing challenges of our time by offering a journey inside a universal theme through engaging and immersive activities." Expos are the "Olympics of Culture," and present an opportunity to showcase their strengths, generate soft power, and create relationships critical to their peace and prosperity.

The United States has participated in International Expositions, also known as World's Fairs, since 1851 and hosted a dozen expos, including 11 recognized by the BIE. The United States Information Agency 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. 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 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 to the United States with bipartisan support via H.R. 534, the U.S. Wants to Compete for a World Expo Act.

Most recently, the United States participated in Expo 2020 Dubai, at which the USA Pavilion brought to life the theme Connecting Minds, Creating the Future. (Note: the experience in Dubai was ongoing during this oral history and was therefore not captured as part of it.)

This study sought to understand through oral history what these experiences meant to those who participated in them, and how we might learn from these experiences to rethink and renew the role of the United States at Expos moving forward. U.S. citizens have engaged with Expos in the past six decades in two ways: on U.S. soil and at Expos overseas. This project asked two questions. First, what were the socio-cultural effects of Expos within the U.S. cities that hosted them most recently? And what were the socio-cultural effects on the Youth Ambassadors who supported USA Pavilions at recent Expos abroad?

In late 2021, two oral historians, Anna F. Kaplan, Ph.D., and Maggie Lemere, interviewed 30 U.S. citizens who experienced Expos in four U.S. cities during the 20th century (New Orleans, New York City, San Antonio, and Seattle), and 16 citizens who participated as Youth Ambassadors at USA Pavilions to date in the 21st century (Astana, Kazakhstan; Milan, Italy; Shanghai, China; and Yeosu, South Korea). These subjects are defined in this paper as narrators; through their stories, we get both a better understanding of the impact of these mega-events and some guidance for how we can chart our future participation in Expos.

At this moment in time, as we work to emerge from the global pandemic of COVID-19, this research provides an opportunity to help us think about how we can leverage Expos to rebuild, renew, and reconnect—globally through our citizen diplomats, but also potentially again here in the United States.

## Methodology

An oral history interview is an in-depth conversation about an individual's lived experiences and knowledge. While the focus of the interview may be a specific topic, such as an Expo, oral history seeks to understand the interviewee as a whole person. It explores the narrator's (i.e., interviewee's) background and perspective as context for what they remember, how they tell their stories, and how they make meaning from

their experiences. Importantly, the interviewer also shapes what the narrator shares and how they share it during the interview, making oral history just as much about the interpersonal interaction (“intersubjectivity”) as it is about the narrator themselves. However, because the narrator’s stories, experiences, and reflections compose the interview, a core tenet of oral history is that the narrator always maintains control and agency over their oral history. This project upheld that central principle by providing each narrator the opportunity to edit, clarify, or redact anything from the interview, as well as to be quoted anonymously if they wished. The synthesis provided and direct quotations used in this paper draw solely from the narrator-approved interviews.

Because oral history interviews are a guided conversation, the interviewers approached the interviews with both prepared questions and the flexibility to follow the narrators’ stories. Before interviewing, the oral historians compiled a list of themes that addressed the project’s objectives and brainstormed questions to explore those themes. During the interviews, they also asked spur-of-the-moment questions to elicit more stories and reflections about each narrator’s individual experiences. Information from the first few interviews created additional questions or themes for subsequent interviews.

The oral historians contacted former Youth Ambassadors via LinkedIn through contact information compiled from Final Commissioner General’s Reports as well as from Global Ties U.S. The project interviewed 16 former Youth Ambassadors: three for Yeosu, four each for Shanghai and Milan, and five for Astana. No Cultural Performers responded to the invitations to participate. Global Ties U.S. Community Based Members (CBMs) identified narrators for past Expos hosted in New Orleans (Global New Orleans), San Antonio (San Antonio Council for International Visitors), and Seattle (World Affairs Council of Seattle). In New York City, where Global Ties U.S. does not have a CBM, narrators were identified by Global New Orleans and through the oral historians’ personal and professional networks. The project interviewed 30 people about U.S.-hosted Expos,

seven each about San Antonio and New Orleans, and eight each about Seattle and New York City. All of the interviews lasted one to two hours. Youth Ambassador interviews were conducted remotely and the interviews about U.S.-hosted Expos were a mixture of remote and in-person interviews.

## Experiencing Expos Inside the United States

Six Expos took place within the United States during the second half of the 20th century. New York City and Seattle hosted Expos during the 1960s. (Note: The 1964-65 New York City World’s Fair was not officially sanctioned by the Bureau of International Expositions.) Spokane, Washington held one in the 1970s. During the 1980s, Knoxville, Tennessee; San Antonio, Texas; and New Orleans, Louisiana, all hosted Expos. The fact that the United States hosted six Expos in 30 years is remarkable if only for the fact that it stopped hosting completely in the 1980s as the Cold War was ending. As mentioned in the introduction, Congress also later restricted the use of appropriated funds for U.S. participation in Expos in 1992.

This oral history work drew on a sample of four of these Expos: New Orleans, New York City, San Antonio, and Seattle. The narrators who spoke of their experiences in these four cities clearly understood that the Cold War was the subtext for these events, but largely, Expos were celebrations that spotlighted their communities for international audiences. Although New York was already a city of global significance by the 1960s, the hosting moments were especially significant for New Orleans, San Antonio, and Seattle. These cities highlighted their global connections: Seattle with Pacific nations, San Antonio with Mexico and Central and South America, and New Orleans with the Gulf Coast and Atlantic nations. In New York, by contrast, the Expo cast Queens “as the center of the universe” for a moment instead of Manhattan. The narrators’ experiences largely varied; however, they all expressed the sentiment that it was as if the world came to them when they could not travel the world.

To welcome the world, each narrator reflected on how the physical presence of Expos forever changed the landscapes of their cities. Although to varying degrees of detail, all narrators remembered the Expo sites and structures, many of them having ultra-modern design and construction. Though the Expos were designed to be temporary, the elements constructed for them became permanent structures and enduring landmarks. In Seattle (1962), this included the now-iconic Space Needle, but also Kraken Park, the Opera House, the monorail, and the Bubbleator. New York City's 1964–1965 Expo was on the same grounds as the one in 1939, but it made Flushing Meadows Park more usable, the narrators said, and added the Unisphere, the New York State Pavilion's observation towers, and Shea Stadium. (The last of these was separate from the Expo, but many narrators grouped them together because they both opened in April 1964.) San Antonio (1968) created HemisFair Park, Tower of the Americas, and the monorail—and narrators also had strong memories of and connections to the gondola, the Women's Pavilion, and the Texas Pavilion, which later became the Institute of Texan Cultures. New Orleans (1984) redeveloped part of the riverfront (the Riverwalk), built a gondola and the Convention Center, and renovated much of its transportation infrastructure such as streets and sidewalks.

In part of this investment, the narrators recalled that all of the cities had a tourism/economic boom around the Expos. Narrators in Seattle, San Antonio, and New Orleans remembered numerous hotels being built, and it seemed that only New Orleans received noticeably fewer visitors than the organizers had originally expected. Narrators from all cities except for New York City understood the Expos were a fundamental opportunity for their cities to introduce and/or reinvent themselves both nationally and internationally. For them, it was as much an opportunity to show off the city—its personality, diversity, and attractions—as it was an international experience. Several narrators remembered the technological innovations on display as much as, if not more than, the pavilions of various countries.

Many remarked that they wished the Expos had

interacted with or been more spread throughout the city instead of relegated to one location. In San Antonio, the narrators also reflected that, with these new, permanent changes to their city came stories of forced removal, displacement, and demolition under the name of urban renewal, and that this experience accompanied the excitement and wonder of the Expo's construction.

Reflecting on the accessibility of past U.S.-hosted Expos, the narrators were split. While entry was relatively inexpensive, the high cost of souvenirs and food inside created some visible socio-economic stratification among visitors. Many people noticed or learned later about questions surrounding the intended audience and visitor demographics of the Expos. For instance, there were exclusionary designs in some cases, such as no easy entrance gates for some people in San Antonio, no Expo elements south of the river in New Orleans, and stories of Black Americans perceiving that the event was not “for” them in Seattle.

While the Expos were not necessarily seminal events in many of the narrators' lives, they were significant enough for people to remember the way they made them feel and how they were personally influenced by the experience of attending them. Almost all the narrators had heard of the World's Fairs in the second half of the 19th century (largely Chicago and New York City, sometimes Paris) but only some had any expectations of what the Expos would be before they opened between 1960 and 1984. Many narrators explained that their experiences traveling abroad were more influential than Expo international pavilions; for others, Expos sparked their curiosity and encouraged them to travel and explore other cultures. Some even attended multiple Expos either in the United States or abroad. Several narrators attributed the beginnings of their careers, significant advancements in their careers or artwork, or the lifelong encouragement to be curious and seek education to their work or experiences at Expos.

Those who worked at the Expos and formed bonds and intimate relationships with coworkers or representatives from other countries often had

more meaningful cross-cultural exchanges than those who were only visitors. For several visitors, it was “something to do.” Expos also created a shared experience. Almost everyone remembered who they went with, such as family, friends, and coworkers, even if they did not remember much of the Expo itself. For instance, John Gordon Hill, a narrator in Seattle, brought to the interview a newspaper scrapbook that he and his father made together about the Expo. Narrators also recalled the innovations and new technologies introduced on site—for instance, video calls, driverless vehicles, flying cars, and nuclear technology—and remembered them as much as, if not more than, the national pavilions. Most found the experience stimulating in some way—for some, it focused their interest in science and education; for others, it encouraged them to travel abroad. Most felt that exposure to different things (technology and cultures) at Expos made “difference” a little less scary for people, by making the rest of the world feel less foreign and making attendees from the United States feel more confident in exploring and experiencing new and different cultures.

Beyond that, the Expos inspired a sense of collective accomplishment and pride for the cities and a connection between strangers. As narrator Alan Iroff (New York City) explained:

There was something about sharing these experiences with strangers that was really interesting... You felt like there were barriers breaking down. I didn't feel excluded in some way or ashamed to be impressed by something. This was for everybody. This fair was for everybody. Other than the money aspect of it, it was accessible to whoever was there. I even saw people in wheelchairs, which you didn't really see [at that time]. People of different handicaps—somebody with one arm. I didn't normally see that and walk next to them. There was that, too.

Nearly all of the narrators supported the United States hosting Expos in the future, but almost all also paused to reflect on the purpose of hosting. They talked about the purpose of Expos being “to educate, and to open borders and communication with other people, and not be

so afraid of differences” (Eileen Mohan, New York City), and how “people like each other if they meet each other” (Don Kraft, Seattle). Many emphasized that the Expos' impact was showing U.S. citizens that their way was not the best way or only way; that Expos are “one of the rare beacons of internationalism” where everyone can dream of the future together (John Gordon Hill, Seattle) and understand “that we're in this thing together, that borders are artificial” (Natesh Mohan, New York City). Nonetheless, narrators cautioned that future Expos could not simply try to reproduce some of the golden age of Expos; they need to be reimagined to fit the current world.

Some narrators advocated for a more honest depiction of countries and host cities—the histories they are confronting and the current issues they face—instead of the “fantasies” (George Cisneros, San Antonio) displayed. Their hopes were that countries and cities could have open conversations and collaborate on addressing past harms and finding innovative solutions to common issues. Others wanted more diverse figures recognized in exhibits. Some referenced the racist stereotyping of peoples which was particularly prominent during 19th and early 20th century Expos.

Relatedly, a lot of the narrators wanted Expos to be more diffuse throughout the host city and supported by the federal government to underscore the value of this city-level diplomacy. Their ideas were to spread out the economic impact and opportunity while also reinforcing and improving existing infrastructure. In that way, narrators suggested that Expos be used to help further social justice efforts and overcome, rather than inadvertently exacerbate, inequities. They talked about sustainability instead of temporary installations and impactful person-to-person interactions instead of fleeting moments of observation or truncated conversations. Narrators in Seattle and San Antonio, who experienced Expos that were supported by the federal government (financially and with presidential visits), credited their success in part to that federal investment. Narrators in New Orleans pinpointed the lack of federal investment as a significant factor in that Expo's financial failure and the feeling that the

United States was divesting from the city. Several narrators also wanted the state and federal governments to continue helping host cities recover after the Expos ended.

## Experiencing Expos Overseas as Youth Ambassadors

The 16 oral history interviews collected with former Youth Ambassadors (previously referred to as Student Ambassadors) who served before Expo 2020 Dubai were overwhelmingly positive. They made it clear that the Youth Ambassador program is a critical part of the USA Pavilion's past and future success. As one of the only national pavilions with such a program, it provided people who may never visit the United States an opportunity to meet and have mutually positive interactions with people from the United States. Youth Ambassadors' physical presence embodied and expressed core national values in the democratic exchange of ideas, in their diversity, and openness.

Prior to 2020, the past four International Expos were hosted by China, South Korea, Italy, and Kazakhstan, respectively. Expo 2010 Shanghai and Expo 2015 Milan spanned six months; Expo 2012 Yeosu and Expo 2017 Astana were specialized Expos that lasted three months. All USA Pavilions at these Expos had Student, or Youth, Ambassadors as a feature:

- **Expo 2010 Shanghai (May-October 2010)** explored the theme Better City, Better Life, and was organized by five major subsections: "Urban Planet," "Urbanian," "City Being," "Urban Footprint," and "Urban Future." Corresponding with the larger theme, the United States' privately funded pavilion was titled Rising to the Challenge, celebrating U.S. innovation, collaboration, and determination. The pavilion had 160 Youth Ambassadors, the largest from any other pavilion in this survey group.
- **Expo 2012 Yeosu (May-August 2012)** was themed The Living Ocean and explored three major subthemes: "Development and

Preservation of the Ocean and Coast," "New Resources Technology," and "Creative Marine Activities." Unlike Shanghai, the USA Pavilion at Yeosu, titled This is Our Ocean, was both privately and publicly funded. The pavilion was staffed with 40 Youth Ambassadors.

- **Expo 2015 Milan, (May-October 2015)** was themed Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life, and was divided into seven subsections: "Science for Food Safety, Security and Quality," "Innovation in the Agro-Food Supply Chain," "Technology for Agriculture and Biodiversity," "Dietary Education," "Solidarity and Cooperation on Food," "Food for Better Lifestyles," and "Food in the World's Cultures and Ethnic Groups." The USA Pavilion, staffed by 120 Youth Ambassadors, explored the theme American Food 2.0: United to Feed the Planet.
- **Expo 2017 Astana (June-September 2017)** was titled Future Energy: Solutions for Tackling Humankind's Greatest Challenge. The United States' privately funded pavilion was staffed by 40 Youth Ambassadors and explored the theme Source of Infinite Energy.<sup>1</sup>

The 16 narrators who participated in these Expos as Youth Ambassadors had little to no understanding of what an international Expo was or what their job would be like before they arrived. They may have heard something of the Paris or New York World's Fairs and thought that these events were a thing of the past. All the same, they were extremely interested in pursuing the Youth Ambassador opportunity to live and work abroad in a country or region in which they had developed an interest. A handful realized that the Expo was also a strategic opportunity for them to explore a career in international relations or public service. All were deeply curious, committed to traveling and working abroad, and having a new experience.

The socio-cultural impact of Expos on these narrators is twofold. Culturally, their participation changed their senses of themselves and their worldviews. Socially, their reflections were more mixed. They expressed a desire for future U.S.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.state.gov/past-u-s-pavilions/>

experiences at World's Fairs to reflect modern U.S. society and be inclusive, allowing for all populations and social classes to participate. Their own investment in the importance of robust U.S. representation in these mega-events led them to share their ideas for how youth from minority backgrounds can not only participate in Expos but also thrive throughout their experience. These narrators want to ensure that U.S. representation at Expos should strive to include people who do not fit inside narrow stereotypes as a means of providing a better understanding of U.S. society, the national story, and the country's potential for the future.

Almost all former Youth Ambassadors in Milan, Yeosu, Shanghai, and Astana felt some level of disappointment seeing the USA Pavilion compared to other countries' pavilions—and reported the lack of government funding as both obvious and disappointing—and offered recommendations that the United States strongly consider more thoughtfully resourcing and curating its pavilions moving forward. Across interviews, USA Pavilion exhibits were rarely referenced, except for the awkwardness or limitations of representing U.S. corporations, since these USA Pavilions were largely corporate-sponsored. Youth Ambassadors yearned for more nuanced, thoughtful presentations of the United States, its story, and the positive ways both the country's history and aspirations can impact others. There is an opportunity to tell a more dynamic story, and a long-term investment by the United States—from the White House, the

U.S. Department of State, and Congress—would help ensure the necessary time and resources to develop a pavilion that connects meaningfully with international visitors.

Across all oral history interviews, it was powerful to see how former Youth Ambassadors see and think in “shades of gray” while contemplating the United States, the world beyond our borders, and the United States' international role. They each offered thoughtful, multilayered, and reflexive analysis; this impacted their understanding not only of U.S.-China or U.S.-Russia relations, for example, but also of the United States and the challenges and opportunities within U.S. society. The experience of being an “ambassador” helped catalyze and cement a more self-aware idea of what it means to be from the United States, and how its people are perceived by other publics, alongside the realization that being from the United States is a constant “ambassadorship.” Each former Youth Ambassador realized the power in consciously shaping our engagement with others across difference, and these narrators have gone on to impressive post-Expo careers in the U.S. Department of Justice, international education, cybersecurity, international fashion, and elsewhere. The majority of the former Youth Ambassadors are multilingual and would be a powerful pool of future public servants and leaders in developing the United States' presence and power abroad.

# The Narratives

## A Word on the Narratives

### Expos Inside the United States

Seattle (1962)

New York City (1964-1965)

San Antonio (1968)

New Orleans (1984)

### Expos Overseas: Youth Ambassador Experiences

Day-to-Day Experiences

Impact of Participation

## A Word on the Narratives

Throughout the assessment of the socio-cultural impact of their Expo experiences, the 46 narrators expressed commonality and consensus that the Expos had such a profound impact on them that they wanted U.S. participation in future ones to be more robust. They also expressed a desire for U.S. participation to be reimagined to accurately reflect the United States today. To them, U.S. representation needs to offer something unique and should capitalize on the country's greatest soft power assets: its values, its innovations, and its people.

In assessing the social impact of these events, all participants felt Expos hosted in the United States should be more integrated into the cities where they were held and aim to be sustainable: How can they better benefit the city, rather than being built just to be torn down? How can they better support local businesses and venues? According to the narrators in San Antonio and Seattle, especially, there is a history of these events being both a vehicle for urban renewal and for destruction, with the investors/developers—that is, the already wealthy—benefiting from profits and tourism even as the preparations for the Expos demolished communities.

In assessing the cultural impact, narrators all agreed that the Expos changed their sense of themselves and their worldviews. Even though it is difficult to measure the success of soft power, there was almost unanimous consensus among these narrators that these events matter—and that they may matter even more going forward in an

increasingly digital, COVID-restricted, and misinformation-rich world. Nothing can replicate the value of building a face-to-face relationship. Through those interactions, Expos can represent a diverse cross-section of the people of the United States. Building on these lessons learned from the past, Expos of the future should seize opportunities to add value to the communities that host them, as well as to the United States' presence in the world.

Narrators in both cohorts—those who participated in Expos within the United States and abroad as USA Pavilion Youth Ambassadors—want to see federal investment in future U.S. participation in Expos to help prioritize inclusiveness, accessibility, and sustainability through both the design of the pavilion and the selection of Youth Ambassadors and other citizen diplomats who represent the United States there. Many wanted to also see what countries and communities were struggling with, how they were attempting to address difficult issues (such as the mistreatment of people based on race/ethnicity, climate change, housing, food scarcity), and where they could find opportunities for brainstorming and participating in international collaboration to address universal issues.

Above all, oral histories are conversations. The 46 narrators' perceptions explored in this paper are meant to spark further conversations nationwide about the United States' representation in future Expos, both at home and abroad.

# Expos Inside the United States

## Seattle (1962)

From April to October 1962, Seattle, Washington, hosted the Century 21 Exposition. Many of the narrators understood its purpose as introducing Seattle to the world, which included how to pronounce the city's name, and positioning it as both a city of technological innovation and the U.S. gateway to the Pacific. Narrators reflected on seeing and understanding technology and innovation as having its own culture, which has defined the city in the past 60 years.

In the following decades, several narrators remarked, science and business icons emerged from Seattle, specifically Microsoft, Starbucks, Amazon, and Costco Wholesale. One narrator, John Gordon Hill, explained that Bill Gates and Paul Allen, who founded Microsoft, grew up in Seattle during a time when the zeitgeist of that Expo had captured the city's imagination. He said, so many "dreams of 'we can do this and it's possible,' from the World's Fair, were still in play, in their minds." Boeing and space exploration companies were also major presences at the Expo, and narrator Anthony Medina understood it as introducing visitors to the culture of science:

It was a different kind of multiculturalism here, going from one culture of, let's say, food and dress, going into another kind of culture, which was the hard sciences, aeronautics, aerodynamics, electronics, all that stuff. Rocket science, to put it in a nutshell. That is another area of culture. [Laugh] That actually doesn't get thought of much as culture, does it? . . . From those early inclinations of being tuned in to technology, maybe honed or initiated from the World's Fair and also the space program, which my dad was so happy to let me pursue.

The Expo's physical construction was also explored. Only a few narrators mentioned that the city condemned and removed people from the neighborhood to build the Expo. Narrator Pamela Kyle described that "the landscape literally changed" to create the Expo, and Hill explained that it was a blighted area, but being the early 1960s,

systemic racism was also at play. More narrators mentioned remembering concerns over plans to relocate a school and (successful) organizing to protect it from demolition. Narrator Don Kraft detailed examples of the Expo's logos, which relied heavily on the symbol for man/male to represent all people—which he remarked would not be acceptable today—and an era of exploration and innovation. Ironically, Hill countered, even though it looks phallic, Seattle local Victor Steinbrueck designed the iconic Space Needle "based on this little goofy wooden sculpture he had in his house . . . called The Feminine One. It was really a female form, and the wasp waist and everything else . . . coming out of the ground and up." When looking through a magazine of the Expo that she brought to the interview, narrator Sandra Evenson reflected on how all the structures "introduced the public to an interest in architecture, that a building just doesn't have to have four walls and a roof." For her, one of the lasting impacts of the Seattle Expo was a revision of spaces and the gift of new buildings and a park that continues to be used.

In addition, the Expo was a place of international and cross-cultural interaction and, simultaneously, exclusion. Narrator William Evenson shared that when Vancouver, Canada, hosted an Expo in 1986, a previously unknown relative in Norway contacted him to arrange a meeting in Seattle en route to the event. This connection deepened over time as they visited each other's countries, and Evenson imagined that other international families similarly took advantage of the Seattle Expo as an opportunity to reunite. Medina also talked about a family from the Philippines visiting them in Seattle for the Expo. At the same time, Medina wished that the exhibits had acknowledged historical wrongdoings and had more frank conversations about issues with which each country struggled. On that same topic, Hill recalled that:

In the Washington State Pavilion, they really dealt with urban planning and what the problems and everything in the future you were going to have to face. . . . The message was we have this

incredible future where we have this world that we can create if we don't blow ourselves up. Because the other thing underlying this whole thing about the '60s was a very real threat of annihilation was under everything. . . . The message in the pavilion was we have this great future if we don't kill ourselves. That was all part of the fair too. It wasn't all just sunshine and unicorns. It dealt with some of the issues going on. Some of them.

Hill pointed out that the Civil Rights Movement was noticeably absent from the Seattle Expo. In researching the Expo for his documentary, Hill discovered that "it took a while, for instance, for the local African American community to warm up to the fair. I remember talking to a few key people and they were saying, 'Yeah, we saw this thing going on. Yeah, it's a white peoples' fair. What's that got to do with us? But then we went, and it was like, this is pretty cool. I like this, this is pretty cool.' Then the music started happening, . . . they were getting to see some of their heroes. Miles Davis or John Coltrane would come to town, it was like, 'Yeah, OK, this is good.'"

## New York City (1964-1965)

The memory of the 1939 New York Expo, which was groundbreaking at that time, was in the background for many of the 1964-1965 Expo narrators. Many recalled hearing that the 1939 event was superior—more engaging, awe-inspiring, and revolutionary. Narrator David Kaplan "remember[ed] hearing people talk about [the 1939] World's Fair because in 1964 people who were only in their forties had gone to the 1939 World's Fair. They had vivid memories of it. Which I think led to my heightened anticipation about the '64 World's Fair." Some suggested that the 1964-65 Expo was not as groundbreaking as 1939 because international travel for leisure was becoming more accessible by the mid-1900s. Because New York City was already an international city with robust tourism, several narrators agreed that, as Arthur Kaplan phrased it, "the whole premise . . . was that [the 1964-1965 Expo] would create an infrastructure for the future." It also put the borough of Queens in the spotlight instead of Manhattan, even if just for a moment. At the same time, the Expo used the same grounds as the 1939 Expo, and the grounds have become permanent structures for a museum and the tennis courts

used by the U.S. Open Tennis Championships.

For other narrators, the 1964-1965 Expo was more of a marvel. Narrators remembered the international pavilions, visiting the observation deck in the New York State pavilion, and exploring the technology displays—especially video phone calling, flying cars, and demonstrations of nuclear energy as being safe. Most narrators enjoyed the Expo, but they attributed more of their international awareness and growth as a global citizen to immersive travel abroad. Even so, many understood their Expo experiences as what narrator Eileen Mohan called "little, mini experiences . . . a wakeup call as a young, young teenager. It doesn't always have to be our way. There's a world out there that does things differently, and some of those ways are better than ours." As a 14-year-old, E. Mohan visited the Expo repeatedly; she recalled that the prince of Morocco even asked her to be his first wife (she declined). Growing up in an immigrant family with parents who worked multiple jobs, the Expo offered her "an authentic way to experience the world without having to travel" and she reflected that "I don't think I would've been so open to my husband and his culture had I not had at least a little experience. It let me have that little bit. Nothing big, but enough to keep me wanting more."

These "mini experiences," open to U.S. citizens of all socioeconomic statuses, had some long-lasting impacts on visitors. E. Mohan remembered "one very good friend, who I used to drag [to the Expo] at least once a week with me, spent a lot of time in Egypt as an adult. She said, 'I would've never agreed to do that had I not experienced that and learned not to be afraid of people who are different.' And I think that's the big thing, which is why I wish we had more World's Fairs. I wish the youth of this country could learn not to be afraid of people who are different." In addition, narrator Natesh Mohan found solace at the New York City Expo as a teenage immigrant who had just arrived in the United States. He was told that the Expo "was the future" but also discovered "the India pavilion because I was already homesick. It was great to just talk to some Indian folks. In '64, there weren't too many Indians around. There was actually one Indian restaurant in Manhattan, if you can believe it. For the longest time, there was only one Indian restaurant."

## San Antonio (1968)

Conversations with narrators about the San Antonio Expo focused a lot on urban renewal and community displacement. Narrators explained that to make room for HemisFair (as the Expo was called), the city cleared out Saint Michael's Parish and demolished almost all the buildings without providing adequate relocation resources. As narrator George Cisneros described:

There were some people who were raising the point that some of these families go back to before the Texas revolution. . . . By '67, . . . the buildings were going up. People had already been evicted. It was very dramatic. Some people tied themselves to chairs in their houses, and the sheriff had to carry them out. Other people lay in the streets and chained themselves to trees." Some narrators remembered or learned later that community members protested outside HemisFair, but they were frequently overshadowed by the excitement of the Expo. Compounding this hurt and loss, apartment buildings on the fairgrounds opened in the 2010s, and elected officials rejected Cisneros's proposal that displaced families be given the right of return at a cost comparable to 1960s rates. Now, when he returns to the fairgrounds, Cisneros says that "I feel their [displaced ancestors'] ghost. I always pay homage. Whenever I can, I poke around in the grass and see if there's any steps, or pieces of tile left, from somebody's patio. Or just a foundation. Maybe some poured cement, in a 24- by 16-foot grid. Or I look at it and see the names of the streets—they're starting to rename them. Go back to the original names. I'll walk with a map from that period, and I wonder, what would San Antonio be like if we hadn't had the HemisFair?"

Narrator Mario Salas raised the question of why the city displaced one community when Victoria Courts, "one of the most impoverished neighborhoods, was left intact right across the street" from HemisFair. He elaborated, "on the one hand, they displaced and demolished neighborhoods. On the other hand, they left intact some of the worst areas."

Narrator Sherry Wagner explained that the University of Texas Board of Regents' decision to renege on the promise to build the San Antonio campus on the fairgrounds—and

instead build on the outskirts of the city to spur developmental profits—exacerbated the feeling of disfranchisement. Wagner said this move made it inaccessible to lower-income students and staff who relied on public transportation, which still had to be built: "I realized how much it took to extend bus service, but you're extending roads, water, all that. What could've gone into making the city better went into extending these things."

In addition, there were competing understandings about the impact of the Expo on segregation in San Antonio. The narrators reflected that popular local sentiment is that HemisFair expedited desegregation in San Antonio to avoid the disgrace of international visitors seeing and experiencing Jim Crow laws. A counternarrative has been that even though public places desegregated, segregation persisted in other forms: systemic racial inequities and economic disparities. Salas explained that the inequities exposed and perpetuated by the Expo "caused people to get more active, for one thing. And at one point, to make the city council go from an all-white city council to one that was a majority people of color council. Where you had five Mexican Americans, and one Black."

Discrimination was also built into the Expo itself. Salas noticed that Black people were rarely hired as contractors, and that during the Expo "the African American community was given some venue, but it was the stereotypical venues, oftentimes." Narrator Rebecca Barrera realized later "that there was no gate facing the East Side of town, which is where the Black community lived. . . . There were five gates, and there was no gate facing that side of town, so you couldn't come in from there." The Expo also opened two days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Several narrators commented on how the Expo's opening night reflected the country's racial divides, with mostly minorities staffing the evening show (an opera) with a primarily white audience, and little or no acknowledgement of King's death. Furthermore, many narrators saw the majority of HemisFair's prosperity going to wealthy developers instead of being distributed equitably throughout and benefitting the entire city. Yet other narrators remembered many new businesses being born out of the Expo and an increase in tourism.

At the same time, HemisFair emphasized the value and importance of the city's diversity. Many of the narrators were college students or recent college students who the Expo hired as VIP guides and info booth staff. These positions required fluency in languages besides English. Barrera remembered:

I have to thank my family for always speaking to us in very correct Spanish and telling us to value it. Because HemisFair was the first time that my language was an asset. It was another reason I loved the Fair so very, very much. It just filled my heart with joy. Because as a little girl in school, we were punished if we spoke Spanish. All of our names were changed. That's how I became a Becky. . . . All the Marys came from Maria. Maria Elena became Mary Ellen. All the names changed. It was a time in Texas and in San Antonio where culture wasn't valued. . . . We were teaching industrialized society, and it wasn't supposed to be a creative society. It was a society that was supposed to produce car manufacturing, things like that. We were all supposed to be the same. We're not the same. We were here already. My dad always said we never crossed the border, the border crossed us. And it's true. This was New Spain in the 1700s when they came. For me, somebody saying, "Wow, you can speak a second language. We'll hire you because of that," was extraordinary. It was eye-opening, refreshing, and exciting. And then, I became a bilingual teacher after that, which was not what I was studying. I was studying fashion design in the home economics department. But following HemisFair, as soon as I graduated, I had my degree, I went to teach one year, and I immediately went into education and got a master's in education because I recognized the validity of being bilingual, bicultural, being global, knowing the world.

Anastacio Bueno echoed this experience of being bilingual and added that HemisFair facilitated the formation of an influential, diverse friend group for him. For example, "My Lebanese friend . . . lived on the North Side of town in the richest neighborhood. I lived on the South Side in one of the poorest neighborhoods. There was probably no other way we could've ever connected unless it happened here. We have been friends for 52 years."

The Expo also exposed residents to new or different ideas. Multiple narrators remembered the novelty

of how one hotel was built modularly, with each room completely assembled elsewhere—down to the ashtrays—and then dropped into place with a crane. The story included that the hotel owner had a party in the last room while it was hoisted into place. Additionally, everyone loved HemisFair's theme, Confluence of Civilizations in America, and the attempts (however varyingly successful) to talk about and celebrate diversity. Several people talked about Vladimír Marek, an influential ballet director, who stayed in San Antonio after the Expo and spent the rest of his life in the United States.

## New Orleans (1984)

Of all the Expos examined, the one in New Orleans seemed to center the city the most. Narrators emphasized that, before the Expo, the city was already diverse with a unique and deep history and culture that melded different international influences, evidenced in part by residents who spoke multiple languages. Unlike the historical memories of the 1939 New York Expo, most of the narrators did not know much about the 1884 World Cotton Centennial in New Orleans—aside from the park created from the fairgrounds—before the city hosted its next Expo a century later. The 1984 Expo was in a different location and, for many narrators, captured the feel of the modern city. Elizabeth Williams commented that "the whole fair was about New Orleans. Just as a feel of the city, the architecture, the art, the music, the sort of celebratory street life." Narrator Peggy Scott Laborde echoed this idea, saying, "people who came down here wanted a taste of New Orleans, colorful and safe, and all that, our culture. . . . I think that it was really just to show off New Orleans." In the same vein, a few narrators described the gondola that traversed the river and connected the northern and southern riverbanks, but they lamented that there were no other parts of the Expo south of the river, so the only thing to do was ride back.

All of the narrators remembered that the New Orleans fairgrounds replaced warehouses that were languishing with the decline of the port, not actual homes, or neighborhoods. A few remarked how the city prepared for the Expo with much-needed

infrastructure improvements like sidewalks, sewer systems, and street paving in high-tourism areas, which still serve the city today. However, narrator Jack Stewart added that the demolition erased some of the historic streetcar infrastructure and artifacts. A couple of the narrators explained that the Expo refurbished the northern bank of the Mississippi River, thereby providing easier access to the riverfront and giving them a new relationship with the river. Others recalled the constant presence of the river in their life, unchanged by the Expo. Marcella Badie described how, living south of the Mississippi, “we went across the river for everything. [Laugh] . . . After church on Sunday, we would go take a walk on the levee, to see the river. . . . See, a lot of people never went to the river. People who lived in certain parts of the city, I think that [the Expo] gave them more insight of what’s in New Orleans, because many of them had never been down that way.”

The Expo’s financial issues, however, were apparent from the beginning. Narrator Keith Twitchell visited the grounds with a group of invited reporters the day before it opened and saw unfinished structures, with prisoners put to work cleaning up construction debris. All the narrators mentioned that the number of out-of-town visitors did not reach nearly the amount expected or needed for the Expo to break even. None of the narrators knew exactly why, especially since New Orleans routinely drew crowds for other events like Mardi Gras. Some speculated that it was a combination of reporters discouraging people to visit the Expo because the grounds looked unfinished the day before opening, a lack of federal investment and interest (President Ronald Reagan, for instance, did not visit the Expo; also competing for attention that summer was the Olympic Games in Los Angeles), and waning interest in Expos because previous ones in the United States were less exciting than expected.

Narrators talked about the Expo losing money and relying on its financial backers to pay debts, including a lawsuit after the Expo to liquidate

everything and pay settlements. Twitchell recalled, “If it had even just lost some money, like most fairs do, I think people would’ve had a pretty good feeling about it. But it was pretty gloom and doom that last six or eight weeks, and the losses were piling up. It was clear that even though we’d done something really well, we’d also managed to screw it up.” Marva Arceneaux described that “I worked for Liberty Bank, and because I was in charge of a lot of their facilities, there, to this day, they still have a lot of World’s Fair memorabilia in storage. . . . Everything, from decks of cards to saucers to little bells that rang.” The repercussion, some narrators said, was that investors were more reluctant to invest in the city and city projects following the Expo. At the same time, Peggy Scott Laborde explained, many small businesses—particularly restaurants—had great success from and were established because of the Expo.

The Expo also became a communal event for the city. Even if narrators did not see the Expo as a significant event, it was something positive that people could share. Badie explained that “the impact was it made people happy, because, like I said, that was all they were looking forward to. It was something to converse about. . . . It’s hard to explain but it was just on everybody’s mind.” Others, like narrator Mark Romig, saw it as having a wider reach: “I think it achieved what it needed to achieve as far as giving people a sense of wonder and that New Orleans could do this. . . . It certainly gave us another product to sell, another reason to visit. It created that many more influencers or ambassadors of the city that would take the story back to those nations about New Orleans, or in this case, if it was somebody visiting from another state, they left with good memories.” Williams, who later cofounded the Southern Food and Beverage Museum, considered participating in the Milan 2015 Expo but declined because it was too expensive. Overall, many narrators agreed, the New Orleans Expo had not introduced but solidified tourism as the city’s new economic mainstay.

# Expos Overseas: Youth Ambassador Experiences

Below are the summaries of 16 narrators' experiences working abroad as Youth or "Student" Ambassadors in cities that hosted four of the last International Expos: Shanghai, China (2010); Yeosu, South Korea (2012); Milan, Italy (2015); and Astana, Kazakhstan (2017). As described in a September 2021 U.S. Department of State media note<sup>1</sup>, the Youth Ambassadors program is a "long-running and central element of U.S. participation at World's Fairs [that] recruits young Americans to serve as our nation's cultural ambassadors to millions of international visitors." Youth Ambassadors "engage audiences on American values, innovation, history, and culture, and advance people-to-people diplomacy."

## Day-to-Day Experiences

For many of the narrators, they were looking for "any way to go back" to a country in which they had previously studied abroad and in which they wanted to gain more experience. The opportunity to travel initially sparked their interest. Brittney Young (Yeosu, 2012) reflected that she thought "it would really look good if I wanted to work for the State Department, and the idea of being a Student Ambassador was so cool to me. At that point, of course, I didn't even know that they still had World Fairs, or I didn't know what an Expo was. [Laugh] I was like, 'What is this, they still have these?—oh, this is really cool.'" Piper Martz (Milan, 2015) stated: "When I found out it was happening, I was like, 'Oh, that's so cool. I didn't know they happen every four, five years—I had no idea they were still going on.' Which made me feel a little bit ignorant, but also made me think, 'Gosh, their marketing team clearly isn't doing a good job in America'. . . . The idea that someone would sort out my housing and flights for me was incredibly appealing. That was a really big draw, as a college student, where studying abroad is—it's expensive." Few had any reservations, even

though they were not sure what exactly they were signing up for or remembered anything substantive from their onboarding experience, except to note that their arrivals (visa applications, flights) were stressful and felt as if they were being organized at the last minute.

When the Youth Ambassadors arrived, they were often amazed by the scale of the Expo and the USA Pavilion itself, and they quickly began to understand what Expos are and what their job would be. They were both surprised and somewhat relieved to find out they did not need to be experts in the USA Pavilion's themes (for instance, "the future of energy" in Astana or U.S. food and agriculture in Milan), but that they were more like museum docents and that much of their job was to provide an in-person connection to the United States. Youth Ambassadors spoke of extremely intense schedules and long days stewarding thousands upon thousands of visitors through the pavilion, from the queue of people waiting outside to get in, and from exhibit to exhibit.

Most of the Youth Ambassadors also had some conversational fluency in the host country's main language and were interested in further developing their language skills. They spoke of how host-country nationals often were both surprised and appreciative that Youth Ambassadors spoke their local language, and that people from the United States would take the time to know their non-globally dominant mother tongue. Narrators reported that this connection gave host-country nationals the feelings of being both respected and important to people in the United States, and that it broke stereotypes of people from the United States not knowing how to speak languages other than English. While the Youth Ambassadors reported that there was a "script" for how to welcome and usher visitors along, they also expressed how they would often go a little off script, tell jokes, have earnest conversations, and diplomatically express their own opinions. This freedom of expression allowed the Youth Ambassadors to further develop

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.state.gov/usa-pavilion-youth-ambassadors-at-expo-2020-dubai/>

and evolve language skills and cross-cultural communication competencies. For many Youth Ambassadors, the Expo was the first time they had done true public speaking and presentations and had to do so in front of hundreds or thousands of people; being challenged to do so in a second language increased their overall confidence and sense of self. Some Youth Ambassadors were also able to do work rotations in the VIP/Protocol office, which they said gave them a unique window on to the world of business and international relations and was a powerful professional development opportunity. Youth Ambassadors universally reported gaining skills in intrapersonal and intercultural diplomacy that have stayed with them over the long term.

According to all our narrators, the unique presence of U.S. citizens—and youth in particular—is what made the USA Pavilions a success. Robust youth participation was highly unique among national pavilions, and Youth Ambassadors reported almost no other pavilions having ambassadors; instead, many hired a few locals to staff their pavilion instead of having their citizens present. Though it was hard for Youth Ambassadors to recall specifics from different conversations they had, several reported interactions that seeded longer-term relationships. These connections included later visiting villages outside of the Expo from where they had met guests and where their own families had historical ties, opening professional and educational opportunities, and establishing long-term friendships. Youth Ambassadors spoke of how the USA Pavilion's audience came not just from the host city, but also from across the host country, and welcomed many rural people and villagers who would perhaps never travel to or meet someone from the United States. They expressed it was exciting and powerful to help provide such a platform.

Nevertheless, Youth Ambassadors reported consistent challenges that made their experiences “bittersweet.” Most of the Youth Ambassadors interviewed thought that the USA Pavilions were subpar compared to other countries. They said the fact that the pavilion was not funded by the U.S. Government was obvious and disappointing. The overwhelming sentiment was that the other countries' pavilions had more interesting and appealing “shows” (it was suggested this was to promote tourism to other countries) whereas they

thought the USA Pavilion was more text-heavy, basic, flat, and uninspiring. Youth Ambassadors felt the pavilion itself was “just some videos,” and that their presence as ambassadors was what made it special.

When asked about their feelings on the corporate representation within the USA Pavilion, the majority of Youth Ambassadors interviewed felt that corporate messaging negatively impacted a more nuanced and dynamic representation of the United States. A handful of Youth Ambassadors felt more neutral and open to a private-public partnership, reflecting that corporations do play a big role in the U.S. way of life. Yet, each narrator felt that the United States missed the opportunity to have a more nuanced representation of its national history and society.

In discussing the experience's impact on them, the majority discussed management challenges and overall conditions. The ambassadorship was also a very different experience for Youth Ambassadors of color and of other marginalized groups, including the LGBTQI community. Black students were sometimes targeted with unwanted attention by visitors and with offensive and ignorant questions. The narrators reflected that, at times, LGBTQI students felt unsafe where LGBTQI identity was not socially accepted and that they would have benefitted from greater institutional support. Minority students with ethnic ties to the host country encountered different and often harsher expectations from host-country nationals than white peers; at times visitors criticized their language skills, questioned their identities, and were less interested in talking to or taking photos with them. Many of the narrators discussed how being an ambassador of color was more difficult for them socially, but also was incredibly valuable as it was allowing greater representation of the United States. As Priya Misra (Astana, 2017) said:

I think that one big thing that was a takeaway, was just how diverse Americans are. They saw so many different Americans throughout their walks through the pavilion. I could pass for a lot of different nationalities, and I would get asked about my nationality as well, and having that conversation with them, being like, “yes, I am American, I identify as an American. No, my parents are not from America.”—and having that exchange with people, that happened quite a lot.

As Michael Brown (Milan, 2015) said, “...what I loved the most, and why I think it really just was an incredible experience for me, was because I felt like I had the power to change the perception of Americans.”

## Impact of Participation

Despite these challenges, there was almost unanimous consensus among former Youth Ambassadors that the Expo was an unforgettable, deeply valuable experience of which they were very grateful to have been a part—and that International Expos matter and should continue in an increasingly digital, COVID-restricted, and misinformation-rich world. Narrator after narrator spoke of how nothing can replicate the value of building a face-to-face relationship across differences. They all felt that they helped show the United States beyond Hollywood and break stereotypes of the people as all blonde, blue-eyed, fast-food-eating, and monolingual. Former Youth Ambassadors spoke of making an impact by being both kind and genuinely interested in their pavilion’s visitors, as well as by diplomatically engaging in critical conversations about global issues such as the health of oceans, agriculture, food, or the future.

Though it could be difficult, ambassadors felt proud to help complicate the idea of what an “American” is—for instance, one could be Jewish and American, not Israeli; Chinese American and not Chinese; Korean American and not Korean. Symone Gosby (Yeosu, 2017) reflected on difficult racist experiences she endured: “It was kind of disheartening to see that and know that this stuff still happens. But maybe that’s just an even more reason why there need to be more Student Ambassadors of color and why this program needs to continue. Or not even just this program, but other programs that support students of color to go abroad and really make sure that their presence is known in the world so that they’re not seen as objects or a shiny thing to stare at or take pictures of.”

Each interviewee said being a Youth Ambassador was a worthwhile experience, even if they did not pursue related careers in international exchange and government service, and even if they faced difficulties and felt exhausted by the end of it. They

reported that their time as Youth Ambassadors helped them to understand what they both did and did not want to do career-wise after the engagement ended—such as pursuing or not pursuing a Foreign Service career, staying abroad, or returning home; or choosing to launch a life in the host country, in some cases. Some of the students continued to live and work in the country of their ambassadorship for years to come, whether in public service, the private sector, or international education and exchange. Many of the alumni remain professionally and personally networked and said they would be excited to attend another Expo in the future.

The Youth Ambassadors interviewed each 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. They spoke of the power of having real relationships and experience with people who are often grossly stereotyped based on national or ethnic ties. Katherine Aizpuru (Shanghai, 2010) shared:

And obviously, this country [the United States] has a long history of anti-Chinese racism. And it really wasn’t something I had thought about or spent a lot of time thinking about. But coming back after that year, it was something that I kind of noticed or was aware of. Everything from how Asian American men were treated in the media to things that would just show up in the New York Times in talking about U.S.-China relations. So I was grateful to have had my own experience over there and really gotten to talk to Chinese people, know Chinese people, and just feel this idea that they’re the boogeyman is just not accurate. I can certainly go in my community and share my experience for whatever that’s worth with whoever’s going to listen to me talk about it.

Former Youth Ambassadors shared about how the experience of being an “ambassador” also helped them reflect on what it means to be from the United States, and to represent their nation in a meaningful manner across the span of their lives. They spoke of returning home with a new appreciation for the United States’ unique history, culture, and aspiration.

# Continuing the Conversation

Oral history is a conversation with the possibility for continued evolution. This paper makes clear the centrality of people-to-people interactions as part of the Expo experience. It is also meant to be an opening in the next chapter of a conversation about U.S. participation in Expos.

No exchange of ideas can succeed without the effort to engage in person-to-person and community dialogue. Beginning in mid-May 2022, roughly 20 Community-Based Members of the Global Ties Network will hold Community Conversations to reflect on these findings, bring

in additional perspectives from their communities, learn more from the U.S. Department of State about Expo 2020 Dubai, and look ahead to future Expo opportunities. These conversations are intended to enable communities and individuals to play the role of narrators themselves, and assume agency for future participation in Expos that are reflective of a diverse and varied U.S. experience.

We hope these exchanges will lead to greater awareness of Expos, the ways in which they represent us locally and globally, and their role now and in the future.

# Appendices

**Additional Resources**

**Notes on the Methodology**

## Additional Resources

The below resource list is not exhaustive, but is a sample of recommended reading to deepen understanding of Expos and their history with the United States.

- Expo Final Reports from the U.S. Department of State: <https://www.state.gov/past-u-s-pavilions/>
- USC Center on Public Diplomacy 2018 article about Student Ambassadors: <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/story/americas-student-ambassadors-world-expo>
- 2017 Student Ambassador blog: <http://www.usapavilion2017.org/blog/index.html>
- PBS history of the 1962 World's Fair: When Seattle Invented the Future
- Seattle Municipal Archives Digital Document Library: <https://www.seattle.gov/cityarchives/exhibits-and-education/digital-document-libraries/century-21-worlds-fair>
- NYC Parks, Celebrating the Enduring Legacy of the 1939 and 1964 Fairs: <https://www.nycgovparks.org/highlights/fmcp-worlds-fairs>
- Queens Museum World's Fair Collections: <https://queensmuseum.org/2013/11/worlds-fair-collection>
- Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (University of Chicago Press, 1987)
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- Hidden Histories video series, episodes on HemisFair 50th anniversary and Lost Neighborhoods: <http://hiddenhistories.tv/march-2018/> and <http://hiddenhistories.tv/july-2018/>
- WYES PBS New Orleans documentary "A World's Fair to Remember" <https://video.wyes.org/video/a-worlds-fair-to-remember-ervf0w/>
- Documentary "When Seattle Invented the Future: The 1962 World's Fair," directed by John Gordon Hill (2012)
- Smithsonian Library Bibliography: [https://www.sil.si.edu/silpublications/worlds-fairs/WF\\_selected.cfm?categories=General%20World%27s%20Fair%20Materials](https://www.sil.si.edu/silpublications/worlds-fairs/WF_selected.cfm?categories=General%20World%27s%20Fair%20Materials)

## Notes on the Methodology

Oral history interviews focus on having a conversation and exploring each narrator's unique perspective. Therefore, they do not follow a set list of questions or conform to a questionnaire. They do, however, explore common themes, which are listed below. Please keep in mind that some interviews deviated from this list to dig deeper into relevant topics not included here, such as one narrator's experience losing their neighborhood in New Orleans to Hurricane Katrina. Others may not have included all of the themes listed below if they were not relevant, such as the legacy of previous Expos in the same city if there were none.

### Expos Hosted in the United States

Overall Guiding Research Themes:

- What were the socio-cultural effects of World Expos on the last four U.S. cities and states that hosted them?
- What was the effect of the Expo on the quality of life of the city and state's residents?
- How accessible and inclusive were the various cultural events to the residents?
- Did the Expo allow for greater community integration?
- In what other ways could cultural impact be defined based on the city's experience?

Questions were also asked about their experience pre-Expo, such as what the host city was like and what was their relationship to the city, the Expo itself, how the city prepared, what their cultural experiences were, the Expo's themes and the pavilions, and how they saw their city change. Post-Expo included how the city approached the dismantling of the grounds, the lasting impact on the city, including tourism and socio-cultural interactions. Lastly, questions were asked about their memory and how their reflections of the Expo

have changed over time and how they thought about Expos and U.S. soft power.

### U.S. Youth Ambassadors in Expos Abroad

Overall Guiding Research Themes:

- What was the socio-cultural impact of participation in USA Pavilions at recent World Expositions in Shanghai, Yeosu, Milan, and Astana on Youth Ambassadors?
- Did the participants develop cultural competencies during their time in the USA Pavilions? If so, what were they?
- Did the Expo participation enhance their understanding of cross-cultural communication?
- Did the Expo provide for greater interconnectivity between the individual and global networks?

Questions were also asked about their experience pre-Expo, such as what compelled them to apply for the youth ambassadorship, their career aspirations, and how they thought about the Expos prior to the experience; the Expo itself, including positive aspects and challenges of their work and experience, and international/cross-cultural interactions; as well as aligning with and/or challenging other peoples' assumptions of what/who is "an American?" Post-Expo questions included their experience re-entering the United States and their communities, what being a Youth Ambassador has meant over time, the impact of the Expo experience on understanding of or thoughts about cultural differences, and how they thought about Expos and U.S. soft power.

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