

Book Review

Into the Void Pacific: Building the 1939 San Francisco World's Fair by Andrew M. Shanken.

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The San Francisco World's Fair, officially known as the Golden Gate International Exposition (GGIE) in commemoration of two engineering marvels, the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge, was created on an artificial island in the San Francisco Bay in 1939. Andrew M. Shanken, an architectural and urban historian and professor of architecture at University of California, Berkeley, focuses on the tensions in the architectural field in America in the 1930s and how this influenced the Golden Gate exposition architecture. The title of his work *Into the Void: Building the 1939 San Francisco World's Fair*, is a reference to D.H. Lawrence's characterization of California as "void Pacific," which the author believes succinctly suggests the region's "relationship to both Asia and Latin America," "its looking West rather than... to the... East and Europe," and to the idea of "continental emptiness, untapped resources, and rugged individualism" (10). The lack of focus on the interior of fair buildings, displays, technology or new consumer products is likely due to the author's belief that "one of the main reference points for the architects of GGIE was architecture itself" (17). Shanken argues that the architecture of the fair was too eclectic to have a clear ideological agenda, and he supports this claim with an in-depth examination of individual architects, who often disagreed, with the planning, which did not follow a clear central theme, and finally with the buildings themselves, which were a mixture of architectural styles and a pastiche of Pacific cultural references. Shanken insists that, unlike other major fairs of the 1930s, its organisers were motivated by "geographical imagination" creating a "Pacific Civilization" rather than embodying "temporal obsessions" (11). In his analysis of the layout of the fair, Shanken argues that there were "pockets of coherence" rather than an "overarching order that could drive a single ideological point home" and he chooses to organize the book along these lines exploring each individual area of the fair and how each expressed a preoccupation with region. He demonstrates how the GGIE attempted to fit San Francisco into the Pacific world (14). One iconic building articulated this melding of Pacific cultures. The Elephant Towers was a combination of "Malayan howdahs atop Burmese elephants that stand at the apex of Mayan pyramids" (90). Moreover, the elephants also related to Californian history. The expression "coming to see the elephant" was

a reference to "the circus like atmosphere of speculation and prospecting" in the 1850s. The intention of the architect, Ernest Weihe, is articulated and supports Shanken's thesis. Weilhe states that the fair "express[es] our own definite and separate theme, employing many motifs based on the great architectures bordering the Pacific Ocean" (91). According to the author, "San Francisco perceived itself as the center of a vast western region that extended across the Pacific," and the mixing of various Pacific cultures in architectural form (Pacific Architecture) at the fair supported this perception.

Shanken's comprehensive examination of GGIE architecture might be too unwieldy for the average reader. However, it provides much thoughtful analysis of a fair that has often been overshadowed by the New York World's Fair, which was held in the same year. Moreover, he challenges previous historical treatments. Shanken disagrees with historical depictions of the GGIE as "modernist and futurist" (19). Through an examination of the individual areas and specific buildings, he establishes that modernist structures were only one of the many styles used at the fair. Several buildings, such as the Federalist Building and the Works Progress Administration's display, had elements of modernist style, yet the majority failed to conform to one specific style. Another modernist-leaning building was the Yerba Buena Club, which the author believes negotiated various styles to please the architects of the fair, the organizers of the club and the individual preferences of the building's architect, William Wuster. Shanken sees this as another example of how "Beaux Arts and modernist sensibilities clashed and sometimes meshed within an emerging regionalist sensibility." The architects with the most influence on the the planning and articulation of the fair and fairgrounds favored a more classical architectural style, like Beaux Arts. Like many fairs in the late 19th and early 20th century, the architecture of the GGIE "invited allegory and symbolic references" unlike the more streamlined and abstract architecture of other American fairs in the 1930s (21). The GGIE architecture was dominated by an older generation who designed the fair more in line with architecture at expositions of the Progressive era in which urban order was seen as imperative. Architects with a more modernist approach were marginalized. Another misconception that Shanken addresses is the characterization of the GGIE as another "Americ[an] version of the colonial exposition." While acknowledging that the appropriation of various cultures in the creation of a "shared Pacific culture" reveals an imperialistic impulse, (107) he argues that the planning, layout and architecture, as well as the lack of European presence and the fact that "most colonies designed their own buildings," complicate or temper a reading the fair as overtly imperialistic. (19). He provides an analysis of the Pacific Area of the fair (where foreign pavilions were erected) to substantiate this claim. In Shanken's view, rather than a "hierarchical" positioning of foreign pavilions with American buildings at the center, the placement of these buildings suggested "unity" and "the flowering of a new peaceful geopolitical order" (150).

Andrew M. Shanken successfully develops one main theme through his scrupulous examination of the fair: San Francisco wanted to articulate a shared Pacific culture and place itself at the center of a Pacific world that would "supplant the Atlantic world" (11). Although what was actually built at the Golden Gate exposition can be read as an eccentric rather than a heterogeneous "Pacific Architecture," the architects with control of the overall look of the fair resisted modernism and tried to achieve a more regional expression of form. Importantly, *Into the Void: Building the 1939 San Francisco World's Fair* highlights the tensions that existed in America in the 1930s between nation and region and between the economic outlook and cultural identification of eastern and western states.