

Book Review

Robert H. Kargon, Karen Fiss, Morris Low, Arthur P. Molella.
World's Fairs on the Eve of War: Science and Modernity, 1937-42.
University of Pittsburg Press, 2015. pp. 206. 3900 yen.
ISBN 978-0-8229-4444-7

World's Fairs on the Eve of War: Science and Modernity, 1937-42 is the collaborative work of Robert H. Kargon (John Hopkins), Karen Fiss (Califorina College of the Arts), Morris Low (University of Queensland) and Arthur P. Molella (Smithsonian Institute). Focusing mainly on America, France, Germany and Italy, the authors illuminate how the various nations responded to "the modern" in their visions of the future through proposed and built international expositions during the interwar period. They argue that the fairs in this period (1937-43) were more obviously ideological and concerned with the future rather than the accomplishments of the past.

The introduction provides a brief overview of earlier fairs and explains their role, along with other public cultures, such as public ceremonies and public monuments, in creating national unity through the creation of shared traditions. Creating a "collective consciousness" was seen as a necessity in times of social, economic and political upheaval. The London Exhibition, for example, sought to educate and reassure the populace during the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution and to justify Britain's imperialist aims. By the 20th century, fairs were being used to demonstrate a nation's strength (military, scientific and economic) and justify claims to global leadership. "Progress" or "the modern" became key tropes by the 1930s. The authors point out that nations participating in world's fairs agreed that "the modern" included "the necessity of industrialism and the importance of science-based or 'high' technology" (5) and that all nations were focused on rationalising production, social planning and bureaucratisation. Through an examination of the planning and articulation of world's fairs, the authors explore each nation's individual version of modernity as well as

how these emphasised the ideological differences among the various nations.

Chapters 2 through 6 examine three realised world's fairs (Paris, 1937; Dusseldorf, 1937; and New York 1939), as well as two fairs that were never realised (Tokyo, 1940 and Rome, 1942). Following the devastation of the first modern war, there was much discussion of modernism. This concern with the dangers of modernism was evident in the world's fairs that appeared in the period. An examination of the Paris fair of 1937 (*Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques appliques a la vie moderne*) illuminates how French criticism of America's "standardized mass production" influenced the fair organizers' privileging of man over machine and resistance to a dichotomy between art and science / technology in the fair's displays. In their discussion of the Dusseldorf fair (1937), the authors explore how the values of National Socialism — putting the needs of "nation and race" above "individual desire" — were articulated. Specifically, they focus on how the fair sought to educate German consumers in order to build consensus for Hitler's Four Year Plan, which aimed to make Germany self-sufficient but would require the German people to change their consumer habits. This is supported by a detailed discussion of how German technology was used to transform raw materials commonly available in Germany into consumer goods, like synthetic clothing materials. Modernist advertising and design was combined with romantic or anti modern rhetoric ("volkisch iconography"), to convince the German public of the possibility of an "abundant future" under National Socialism free from the "degeneracy" of western capitalism.

Japanese and Italian fairs are also seen as being informed by "reactionary modernism," a reference to Jeffrey Herf's *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (1984). Germany's rapid rearming, successful military campaigns and propaganda as well as its aims for self sufficiency relied heavily on modern technology, but this was combined with a belief in national or racial myths. Japan's concerns with modernism were evident in the proposed Tokyo exposition and its displays at various world's fairs in the period. Like Germany and Italy, the Japanese embraced science and technology but highlighted how Japan had maintained its traditions or "Japanese spirit" despite rapid industrial development. Japan's pavilion at the Paris exposition was a succinct example; it chose to house traditional Japanese arts and crafts in a modern "Corbusierian building." The author's offer a painstakingly detailed and well researched discussion of Japan's struggle to create a national modern architecture in light of the strong influence of Western modernist styles. Like the German fair, the proposed Italian fair (Rome 1940) was heavily influenced by ideology. Under Mussolini, the proposed fair would have displayed the Fascist embrace of science and technology combined with a reverence for Ancient Rome. Unlike the proposed Japanese fair, the Italian fair was actually partly realized in the period between its conception (1935) and its proposed completion (1942-3). Several well

known monuments and museums, such as the Marconi obelisk, were constructed for the proposed fair.

The strengths of *World's Fairs on the Eve of War* are its ability to provide a clear picture of the period under examination and to elucidate the struggles with modernity experienced in intellectual circles and their manifestations in national fairs. The most interesting discussions are, surprisingly, of those fairs that were never actually built. The details of planned and unbuilt architectural structures related to the Italian fair offer very clear evidence of Mussolini's desire for absolute control and blatant self-aggrandisement. The chapter on the New York world's fair is the most disappointing. It makes clear the competing visions of the future by examining three popular fair attractions (Democracity, Futurama and the film *The City*), but a discussion of these differences in the broader society is inadequate. Moreover, the chapter lacks much of the detail that the other chapters display and downplays some of the common ideas that appear in the American and European fairs and society in general. Although the fears of science and technology in America are acknowledged, there is only passing acknowledgement of anti-modernism in America. David Gartman notes that during the New Deal years, the construction of architecture and monuments was largely state sponsored and that the main aesthetic, as dictated by an organised working-class, was romantic modernism. He also notes that the "aesthetic of . . . ideological monumentalism" during the New Deal was neoclassicism similar to that of Nazi Germany (161). The authors argue that "most Americans looked for the way forward . . . in organized knowledge-in invention, science related technology, and agriculture." This suggests that Americans were generally accepting of modernism without reservation. However, the popularity of a streamline aesthetic (displayed at the fair in Norman Bel Geddes Futurama) indicates American distrust of the technology or the machine. Streamline is seen as smoothing out mechanical angles or hiding the role of the machine in production and is identified by David Gartman as an example of "romantic modernism."

Moreover, while there is considerable attention in other chapters to a discussion of architecture and how it revealed a crisis with the modern, there is little discussion of the anti-modern in architecture in America. This is somewhat surprising given that the pre-eminent architect of the period was Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright was deliberately excluded from the American fair despite his fame. Gartman highlights the similarities between the aesthetic of Wright and Hitler (176). Oddly, the authors fail to see the irony that the New York fair reopened as a "folksy country fair . . . [which] offered fairgoers a nostalgic escape from events abroad" or how this might be seen as a rejection of the messages offered at the 1939 version of the fair. Finally, seeing as modernism is a key element of the book, a more complex or theoretical discussion of it and related terminology is needed. The authors rely on Jeffrey Herf's 1984 work for terminology when more recent works, such as Thomas Rohkramer's

"Antimodernism, Reactionary, Modernism and National Socialism: Technocratic Tendencies in Germany, 1890-1945", complicates the use of such terminology. Rohkramer argues that Herf's "attempt to identify one peculiar tradition of 'reactionary modernism' which prepares the ground of National Socialism, is not convincing. First of all, and most importantly, he [Herf] constructs and solves a problem that does not exist. Rohkramer suggests that "It is simply not strange or 'paradoxical to reject the Enlightenment and embrace technology at the same time', but common practice in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany as well as in many other countries (49)"

Overall, the book offers an interesting model for a comparative study of word's fairs, one that articulates the main ideological currents of a specific time period while offering a wealth of specific detail on individual national concerns.

Works Cited

- Gartman, David. *From Autos to Architecture: Fordism and Architectural Aesthetics in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton Architectural Press, 2009. Print.
- Rohkramer, Thomas. "Antimodernism, Reactionary Modernism and National Socialism: Technocratic Tendencies in Germany, 1890-1945." *Contemporary European History*. 8, 1 (1999): 29-50, 1999. Cambridge University Press. Print.

Maureen Boulanger