Designing Tomorrow: America’s World’s Fairs of the 1930s, by Robert W. Rydell and Laura Burd Schiavo. Yale University Press, November 2010. 224 p. ill. alk. ISBN 9780300149579 (cl.), $45.00

Based on an exhibition of the same name held at the National Building Museum, Washington, DC, October 2010-July 2011, this book is co-edited by World’s Fair historian Robert W. Rydell, and co-curator of the NBM exhibit, Laura Burd Schiavo. The book examines how the world’s fairs during the tumultuous period in the U.S. between the Great Depression and World War II embraced modernism as a vehicle to promote science and technology and restore faith in the nation’s social, economic, and political future.

The essays and images presented are well chosen to illustrate the often conflicting forces present during the fairs of this decade. Modernist fair architects and industrial designers hoped to re-invent America by both building on the past and looking to the future. Corporate produced, innovative exhibits that employed modern display techniques such as dioramas, murals, and kinetic, hands-on demonstrations awed fair-goers, yet equally popular were the large scale retrospectives of historic art treasures on loan from museums and collectors. Pan Americanism and the progressive, socially democratic designs of exhibition architects and community planners were in contrast with the FHA programs that favored the white middle class and racially homogeneous suburban neighborhoods. In the family home, the architecture, floor plans and furnishings were influenced by modernizing forces and traditional idioms, minimalism and capitalism, and the idea of public and private spaces. Finally, Designing Tomorrow looks at post-modernism and the Dystopian skepticism that viewed the fairs’ Utopian optimism as blind to modernism’s oversimplifications and contradictions.

Comprising roughly one third of the pages and many of the book’s excellent 102 black-and-white and thirty color high quality illustrations, the centerpiece of the book is Schiavo’s photo essay. Images of the non-traditional plans for the fairgrounds, new building materials, architectural and exhibit design, and color and lighting design provide the reader with an experience that attempts to answer the difficult question, what was modernism in the 1930s?

Designing Tomorrow is well designed and uses a clean, modern font. The essays are scholarly but not so dense that they cannot be digested by non-experts. A selected bibliography, brief contributor biographies, and index are also included. Two of the books essays have been reworked from previously published materials, and some of the images have appeared elsewhere, but the quality of the images and cohesion of the essays would make this an excellent addition to an architecture or design library collection.

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