The Midway Reborn:

THE ARCHITECTURE OF CONSUMPTION

BY ALAN HESS

The front door of Chicago's Columbian Exposition, the great World's Fair of 1893, opened onto the White City. Crowds drawn to Chicago from around the world walked into a glorious and confectionery ideal city of domes, arcades, triumphal arches, and heroic statuary bordering Lake Michigan. The fantasy ranged around well-disciplined lagoons and was designed by the best known American architects and landscape architects of the day: Frederick Law Olmsted, Daniel Burnham, Richard Morris Hunt, Louis Sullivan, Charles McKim, Stanford White.

It was a fantasy city devised by the latest means. On the fair site's land side, visitors flowed from downtown in a brisk, efficient stream from trains speeding along newly-laid train tracks. Lakeside, boats brought even more visitors directly from downtown Chicago to the pier. A mechanically moving sidewalk, one of the fair's many harbingers of the century to come, carried seated fair-goers down the long pier just as its techno-grandchildren would shuttle jet travelers to the far ends of air terminals seventy years later. Some hoped to use the sidewalk system throughout the fair, but pushchair operators lobbied against competition for their seventy-five cent service in the center of the fair.

Whether approached by land or by lake, the heart of the fair was all white (a "whited sepulchre," thundered Frederick Douglass of the exclusion of Negro employees) and all classical. Yet the fluted columns, domes, colonnades, strictly symmetrical façades, and impressive scale were less Imperial Roman than Imperial American. Try as they might—and they did not try very hard—this was never an archaeologically accurate resurrection of Rome. Lit by strings of electrical light bulbs at night, the wonders of the coming century merged with the memory of Western civilization.

This was nowhere more true than at the back door of the exposition. It opened onto a very different wonder. The Midway Plaisance, a less grand but still captivating district, was a straight and narrow mile-long panhandle that led inland from the fairgrounds to Cottage Grove Avenue and the newly developing South Side neighborhoods. Most visitors arrived this way. The White City had been planned in the most up-to-date manner: pavilions were deployed like an army in impressive hierarchy; the central forecourt contrasted with the studied naturalism of romantic islands and lakes nearby. The Midway, in contrast, displayed no similar aesthetic compass. It had simply been a long narrow site for amusements and ethnographic displays, a pragmatic bit of afterthought. The 1876 Philadelphia World's Fair had attracted amusements, too, Chicago's planners remembered, but these had lurked outside the fairground gates and also outside the authority of the fair's keepers. In the most modern and efficient American managerial way, the fair's designers united commerce and art under a large, for-profit endeavor. Still, the money-making amusements were not considered important enough to deserve the intense aesthetic effort of romantic vistas and landscaping saved for the White City.

All for the better. The Midway's commercial functions could develop their own architectural forms without laboring under the burden of tastefulness. The Midway's strip offered a long, straight pedestrian street with commercial concession sites ranked simply and pragmatically on either side: Chinese temples, medieval battlements, minarets, cycloramas. Visitors wandered by exotica,

ranging from a South Pacific village, complete with imported natives in thatched huts, to an Austrian beer garden. The belly dance was introduced to American audiences at the Little Egypt theater in the Street in Cairo section. A captive balloon took daredevils aloft for the view. But at the Midway's center stood the fair's greatest technological and popular triumph: the Ferris wheel. Daniel Burnham and the other great architects intent on impressing the world with America's new might chose not to compete with the French Eiffel Tower, that useless wonder of iron, graceful engineering, and compelling height, built just four years before at the 1889 Paris World's Fair. But the coming century's spirit of hyperbole, techno-kineticism, and populism could not be omitted from the Midway. A private commercial concession built Ferris's wheel. Unlike the tower, the wheel moved. And at fifty cents for a twenty-minute ride (the carousel cost five cents) that vaulted riders 250 feet into the air in a "gentle and nearly noiseless" arc (reported one guidebook), it was the fair's most popular attraction. Unlike other concessions, it earned back its entire cost. Scanty fair crowds ballooned once it opened in June.

Poised on the cusp of the new century, the Midway was TV before TV; it was popular, varied, risqué, informative, sensational, educational, commercial, thrilling. The Javan settlement, with the Ferris wheel looming over its grass roofs and stilt houses, echoed with the sweet, sad sound of a gamelan orchestra. Like Disneyland sixty-two years later, the Old Vienna concession with its brand-new weathered architecture charged an admission fee (twenty-five cents) that allowed you to buy a drink (for ten cents). Remarkable architecture, strange sounds, curious sights, and novel experiences proved irresistible to fair-goers a hundred years ago. They were our direct ancestors.

The fair's big-name designers thought they were laying the groundwork for the next century in the idealized White City. But as so often happens, the real innovations developed not on center stage, but slightly out of the spotlight. As America slouched toward its century in the sun, it was the Midway that held the real seeds of a new consumer and commercial century.

These front and back doors, the White City and the Midway, America's grand public face and its much more diverse architectural id, triggered a conceptual turn of the century a few years before the chronological one. The front door defined the way America wanted to be seen; the back door was closer to the way America actually did business, actually built itself. America may have conceived of itself nobly in terms of Art and blessed Progress ever upward, as displayed for all the world in the White City's great white pavilions; America may have thought that its weapons to conquer the century were steel, concrete, and glass, a mastery of morality and history, American navies and diplomacy. But in a much more practical and ingenious manner, America was to bestride the century with its commerce and popular culture. Lenin and Hitler, Gandhi and Picasso, Stalin and Mao would have their moments. Yet by the distant 1990s, it was the movies and the malls, entertainment and information, which led America to achieve influence. Chicago's 1893 fair kicked it off in a big way.

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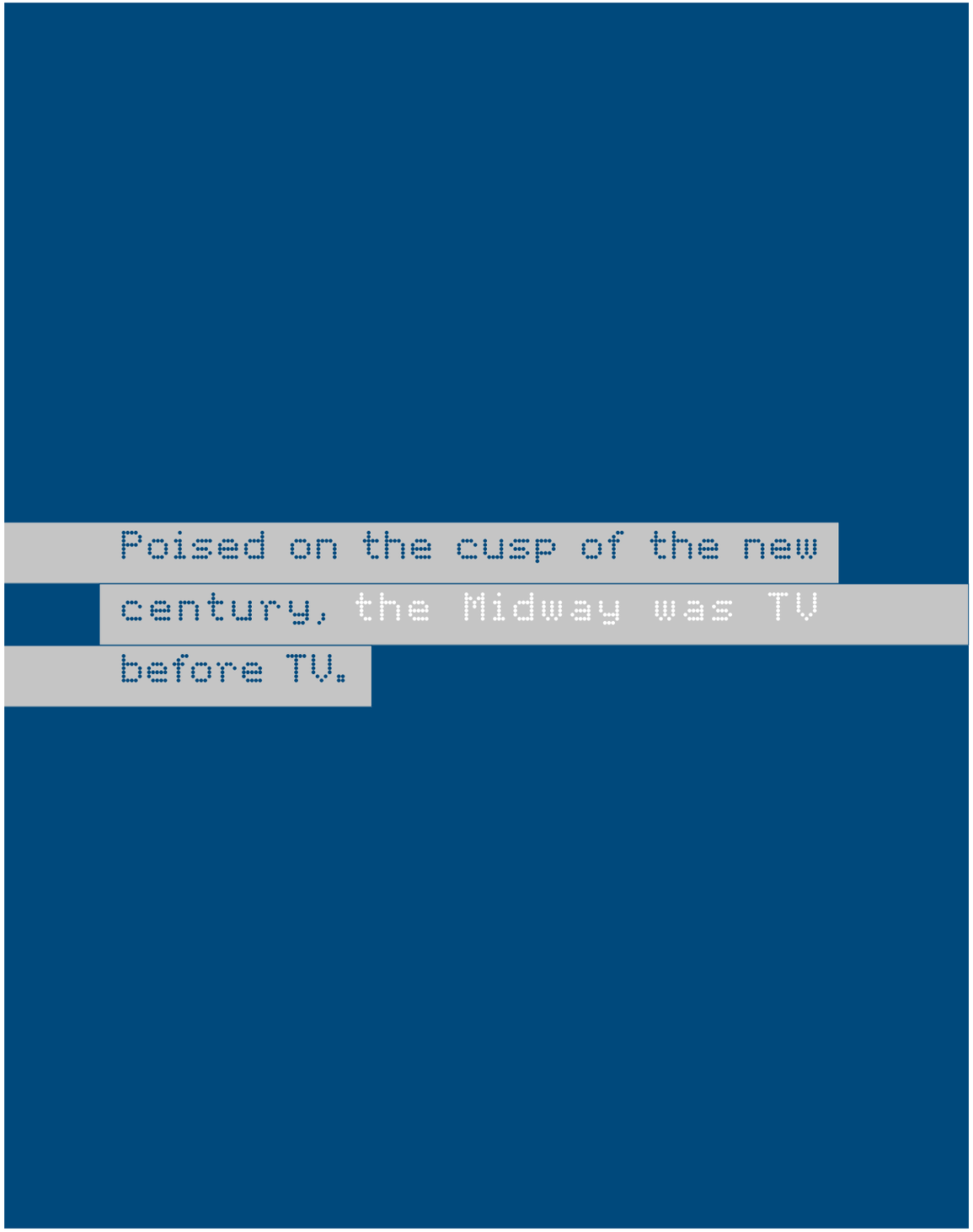
Misled by Louis Sullivan, the history books have opined that the 1893 fair, with its historical revival styles, set back American architecture by decades. Yet a much more dynamic design calculus was at work. The dominating theory of the White City was unity; the de facto rule of thumb for the Midway was variety.



The White City used unity of color, style, and the placement of buildings to show off America and Chicago. It must have seemed like a good idea. Americans spilled out of the fair with a taste for something new. Few cities had attempted to design—let alone to build—an entire urban district this large all at once; few architects in America had been able to work on such a broad canvas before 1893. Some visitors went home and politicked to transform their miscellaneously organized towns into White Cities of calm, order, and grandeur. Washington, D.C., only a fragment of L'Enfant's vision in 1893, finally got around to filling in some of the gaps along the Mall in the image of the White City.

Yet outside of a few other civic-funded pockets—San Francisco's Civic Center in the wake of the 1906 quake, or New York City's privately-funded Columbia University—most cities had not the means nor the political will to recreate the White City. As the twentieth century matured, large-scale, unified projects did develop. In an increasingly corporatized America, they were to become a common form, from Rockefeller Center to Levittown to Walt Disney World. But these White City progeny proved most interesting when they were also twisted and distorted in provocative and innovative ways by the variety and entertainment of the Midway. In the Chicago fair's two temporary model cities can be seen the architecture of the twentieth century.

Forget modernism, forget industrial aesthetics. The wonders of steel, concrete, and glass would have a part to play in the architecture of the century. It simply was not to be the starring role. The efficiency and planning, the imperial pretensions and the democratic variety, the entertainment and the wonder and awe, the speed and thrills and tales—these were to define the twentieth century as it would be built and lived in the United States. The architecture of production—factories, warehouses, grain elevators—would not be most important; instead, the architecture of distribution, consumption, advertising, and recreation would dominate. Not many architects realized this. Certainly not many trying to write or propagandize or explain or advocate architecture realized this. For this architecture did not often find its way into serious architectural history books.

The architecture of distribution and consumption had already been born in the department store in Paris, Philadelphia, and New York after the Civil War. Logically, American World's Fairs were in effect grown-up department stores. Department stores were among the first large-scale commercial responses as the American economy altered after the Civil War from a largely self-sufficient population that stitched its own clothes, taught its own children, raised its own food, and made its own entertainment, into a population that instead went out and *bought* those things—things that were available because of the overwhelming, unexpected success of the industrial age.

Solving the problems of producing abundance was not enough; that simply created problems of distributing and selling all that abundance. The new department stores on the outside resembled fragments of the White City, but on the inside they evoked the hodegepodge of experience and visual stimulation and curiosities and entertainment offered by the Midway. Outside, they were palatial in size and style. As public places owned by private capital, they played an active role in educating the public about art, home furnishings, history, current events, mass taste, and social needs; some of the first U.S. exhibitions of modern art imported from Europe were held in department stores—commercial venues more accepting of novelty and change than the conservative museums that appointed themselves keepers of art's flame. Department stores advanced the architecture of advertisement in the age of the consumer with the invention of decorated display windows. On a smaller but no less complex scale than the World's Fairs, the stores worked out the problems of designing showplaces for the consumer century: the practical problems of distribution; the problems of sales appeal, advertising; the problems of creating spaces that would attract by convenience or visual astonishment; the problems of efficiently and politely moving people through a public space.

If the White City itself was difficult to imitate, the private sector proved it could replicate the Midway. Beyond department stores, on a grander, more complex scale, amusement parks across the United States proved this.

George Tilyou, a honeymooner at the Chicago fair, in 1897 opened Steeplechase Park at Coney Island in the image of the Midway. In 1903 Frederic Thompson and Elmer Dundy opened Luna Park, an even more delirious mix of White City unity and Midway fantasm. Continuing the development of the Midway's kineticism, these parks included thrill rides and narrative rides that took visitors to Paris, to the moon, and to the Creation of the World. The amusement park became a national architectural form, a populist franchise, and a way to define city districts at Chicago's Riverview Park, Pittsburgh's

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Kennywood Park, Sandusky's Cedar Point, and elsewhere. These amusement parks kept the Midway alive until, almost exactly at mid-century, all the vectors of tourism, economics, population growth, entertainment, ideal cities, and consumerism coalesced in a white-hot explosion of consumer architecture at Anaheim, California's Disneyland.

There is nothing new at Disneyland. And yet everything is "new" at Disneyland: it's a permanent, year-round World's Fair. It was cleaner and newer than the old amusement parks, long in decline by the 1950s from a pre-Depression heyday. Disneyland's rides were retro: none had *not* been seen fifty years before at a World's Fair or an amusement park. Still, a fresh sense of movement and kineticism imbued this entertainment district. Ferris was here in spirit, in the technology of the Monorail, the mining car ride, Autopia's ultra-safe freeway, the illusion of the trip to the moon—kineticism splintered into dozens of forms, and each telling a story, each communicating a meaning as it provided an experience. Like the White City, Disneyland offered a unified experience, an entire city, even if one were a citizen for only one day. It was swept nightly; restaurants and shops were restocked at night, out of sight of visitors; it showed a clear

architectural unity, from the axis of Main Street to the plaza hub where the different lands splayed outward—all just like the White City. Scenes as naturalistic (and as artificial) as those in Olmsted's plan for the White City combined with more intensely urban moments of crowds, buildings, and commercial activities. It was the White City reborn for the second half of the century.

But in even more important ways, Disneyland also suggested the Midway reborn. For Disneyland was popular and varied, juxtaposing the frontier with space travel, jungles with Alps, Indian tribes with Euro-centric Victoriana, amusing and didactic. On a scale and with a thoroughness hinted at, but never achieved by the department store magnates, Disneyland was a "painless" department store, a place where ancient acts of selling and buying became an entertainment, subsumed under the story line and the environment. No shopping mall has been the same since.

Neatened up, sharpened, Disneyland was the sequel to the 1893 fair. When the elements of consumerism, mass audience, technology, kineticism, unity, managerial efficiency, and storytelling are revisited and revised, the twentieth century comes into sharper focus. The century has been about entertainment in the broadest sense: about travel, about thrills, about expanding one's borders, about telling stories, about passing on values and culture. The World's Fairs were about selling things — art, national reputation, Singer sewing machines, Krupp armaments, your country's products, Chevrolets and Fords and Chryslers. Fairs were commercial in purpose and financing, though supported by public funding as well.

Like department stores, Disneyland was privately financed, but created one of the best known, most public places on earth. People could gather there.

The architecture of the twentieth century could have led in many directions. It could have led to an austere worship of the sublimities of steel and glass; Ludwig Mies van der Rohe offered that path. It might have led to a reborn classicism; Albert Speer (and others) gave that a try. But the commercial vernacular of the Midway has held sway. It has been spoken and refined. It has adapted to new technologies, to new ways of seeing introduced by

movies, television, and computers. It has become the true architecture of the twentieth century.

EPILOGUE:

Sir Henry Hoare stands on the rim of a small valley at Stourhead, his estate southwest of London. He peers down into the peaceful lake below. Across the way, at the bottom of the valley just above the waterís edge, the dome of a Greek temple rises over a clipped lawn in a small clearing offering the very picture of classical enlightenment. To the right, facing a different direction and a different era, a rambling cottage of pointed, Gothic-arched windows and crockets is half-hidden by the melancholy evening shade, a momentary haven from a seeming spiritual storm. Glancing to his left, Hoare sees a small Roman temple standing proudly on a hilltop. His eyes flicker to the waterís edge far below, where a gnarled, rocky grotto barely rises out of the green water. From its depths gazes a mythic creature. He walks down a path to cross a stone bridge across a neck of the lake. Peace. Meditation. Nature. The images of civilization. Any eighteenth-century reader of antiquityís authorsóand any aristocrat would be such a readerówould understand the meanings implicit in Hoareís gardens. He had lovingly gathered images and placed them in an artificial landscape of his own devising. The gardens are carefully tended by gardeners and hydraulics engineers.

For centuries, aristocrats have created the landscapes of their dreams, their fantasies, their knowledge, their history. The twentieth century gave the same power of creation to the masses.