

The 1893 World Exposition: A Contest of Cultures

James Gilbert

Highbrow or lowbrow? James Gilbert looks at the competing visions of American civilisation on offer at Chicago's *fin de siècle* Exposition of 1893.

Few events in American history were more self-consciously styled to define the state of American civilisation than the Columbian World's Exposition held at Chicago in 1893. Its symbolism was heavy, didactic and obvious. The Fair directors sought to construct every element of the Fair to demonstrate the march of Western civilisation through the United States to Chicago. In summing up this evolution, the metaphor of high culture provided the link, the symbolic language that asserted the combined superiority of European art and architecture and American Victorian moral sensibilities.

At the same time, the grandiloquent neo-Classical architecture, the bombastic decorations, the sheer scale and order of the exhibit, suggest something more than a show of confidence at play. Indeed, imbedded in the patterns of display were signs of an obvious struggle between forms and definitions of modern urban culture. In the almost wholly immigrant city of Chicago, the American-born Protestant elite, who controlled the Fair, strove to impress their ideas of appropriate art, theatre, literature, and entertainment upon a population that was designing its own forms of leisure. This contest reflected a continuing and sharp competition between uplifting genteel ideas and the commercialism of the city streets. At stake was nothing less than the future of American civilisation.

Despite the confidence that the cultural leaders of the city and the nation expressed at the Fair, it was clearly easier to assert propositions about culture than to convince an audience. While spectators were cajoled and coaxed, they were not necessarily convinced about the superiority of elite culture, or the urban vision of the architect, Daniel Burnham, who led the phalanx of city planners and builders who designed the grounds. Even the historical timing of the Fair in the midst of the evolution of such celebrations, from London's Crystal Palace to the subsequent development of leisure-orientated popular cultural events like Disneyland, makes this a curious, unstable event, filled with contradictions and meanings that inevitably spilled over the intentions of its planners. As a historical event it fixed for a moment the evolving struggle in America over the form, meaning, and importance of popular commercial culture – a struggle that continues to this day.

The Columbian celebration, located in the United States' most exemplary city, comprised a physical, aesthetic and moral plan for relating and separating different concepts of culture and commerce. The designers of the Fair meant their statement to be definitive. Two cultures would be exhibited. The first, contained in the glorious White City, demonstrated the higher

values of art, education, liberal arts, and the fruits of human endeavour, manufacturing and craft. Every object was free to behold; nothing was for sale. If commerce existed – and it certainly did – it was disguised inside the monumental buildings made of plaster of Paris and jute, the mouldable and disposable putty of high culture.

In an appendage, as a concession to popular tastes, the planners included the Midway, a riot of entertainments and exhibits, most devoted to moneymaking. Here the relationship between culture and commerce was reversed. Rather than a unity of design and material, the Midway presented a cacophony of sights, sounds, and purposes. From carefully laid out anthropological exhibits – living dioramas – to camel rides, dancing girls, circuses, and ethnic restaurants, a swimming pool and a giant Ferris 'Wheel, the area was united only in its obvious and important commercial possibilities.

If a Utopia, the White City was intended by its sponsors to represent a perfected version of the city they knew best: Chicago. As a metaphor for that troubled and dismaying city, the Fair defined itself by the careful ordering of areas and architecture, the placement of buildings, the classification of elements within them, by organisation, order and hierarchy. At least on the planners' tables and in guidebook maps, this pattern was clear. Moving out from the central area of manufactures, liberal arts and art were the agricultural and mining buildings representing the bases of modern civilisation. Next came the women's pavilion, occupying the mediating gateway between high and vulgar" culture. Then came the Midway with its confusing combination of anthropology, entertainment and commerce.

The White City showed obvious traces of elite Chicago with the most important elements of that city rearranged and reordered to suit the purposes of its builders. New public institutions devoted to higher culture and consumption – libraries, the symphony, department stores, museums and universities – were represented by the Palace of Art and the Liberal Arts and Manufactures Building. At the opposite extreme and far away physically was the polyglot Midway, representing the institutions of immigrant Chicago, with its huge Irish, German, Scandinavian and Eastern European populations. Although tourists visited the Midway and reported back (in what became a cliché) that it was like taking a trip around the world, they might have found more authentic exoticism had they strayed into Chicago's huge and multi-cultural working-class sections where foreign cultures were unadorned by commercial fantasies.

Despite these efforts to create Utopia, or perhaps because of them, like all such plans, they failed to work. This failure to maintain separations, to divide commerce and culture, provides a fascinating focus for the cultural struggles that have engaged Americans throughout most of the twentieth century.

Why did elite Chicagoans, when they came to envisage culture in the late nineteenth century, insist upon such a profound separation from commerce? One possible reason may be that a few of them had been persuaded by Matthew Arnold's essays in which he defined culture as the best in thought and life. As Hamilton W. Mabie paraphrased the notion in 1893 for Outlook magazine, culture could only be appreciated by those who understood it best. One could be wise, knowledgeable, but still without culture, for that depended upon opportunities for leisure and solitude – 'the ability to keep one's hands and eyes idle at times'. No attitude could be further from that of commerce whose restless energy demanded eagle eyes and grasping talons.

Writing in the same year about literary Chicago, William Morton Payne made the same severe distinction between literature and commerce. Chicago represented the quintessential

American city, he wrote,

where the restlessness, the energy, and let us frankly add, the arrogant self-assertion and dull philistinism of the American character are more clearly typical than perhaps anywhere else in the land.

Payne's torturous effort to deny any connection between culture and commerce, to define culture, indeed, as an evolution out of the base clay of economics, was a typical definition at the end of the nineteenth century.

His words were seconded, in an even more typical effort to define culture, by Thomas James Riley, a reformer and social worker, who wrote the intriguing guide to Chicago's 'goodness' in 1905, entitled *The Higher Life of Chicago*. Riley's separation of culture and commerce broke around a familiar symbol. 'If Chicago has the biggest stockyards in the world', he wrote, 'it also has one of the greatest orchestras. If the former represents the commercial, the latter represents the higher life of the city'. To introduce his catalogue *raisonne* of higher works, he declared:

It is my purpose to bring together in a somewhat encyclopaedic way the institutions and agencies in the city that are making for its intellectual, social, moral, aesthetic, and religious betterment. I hope in so doing to bring to the attention of those interested in this higher life a somewhat comprehensive account of the city's endowment of culture, to the end that they may become more conscious of the aggregated cultural resources and that the higher life of the city may become conscious of itself.

Despite the circumlocutions of this passage, Riley made an interesting and compelling point. Culture, as he defined it is aesthetic, moral, religious, and social. By listing the various institutions Riley hoped to bring higher culture to self-consciousness, by empowering the leaders of the city with self-knowledge, by creating a common centre, a community of opinion devoted to moral and aesthetic betterment. This was advice with which the planners of the White City could have agreed.

Chicago education reformer, the Reverend F. W. Gunsaulio, expressed a similar conviction in his 'Columbian' speech of 1892 before the graduating class of the Chautauqua. Institute of Culture (an organisation devoted to the popularisation of culture). To the speaker, the moment was drawing near for the Christian scholar, using the instrument of Christian culture, to reach ever higher ideals of civilisation and evolution. As he put it,

Man... stands prince of the world, listening to ten thousand voices of science telling him, with an eloquence almost equal to the eloquence of that old past: 'This is your world, Adam, go out and subdue it.'

These few examples illustrate what many writers meant by the word culture in the late nineteenth century. This usage only roughly fits our intricate and highly theoretical use of the term today. Indeed, when used at all in the late nineteenth century, culture frequently referred to an aesthetic that rebuked the distasteful and tasteless in the preoccupations of commerce.

There is some irony in the fact that the planners of the Chicago Fair, including some of the city's great, rough-hewn merchants, manufacturers, and hoteliers (men who would profit directly from the celebration) encouraged the architect Daniel Burnham to construct a unified city of exterior symbols of culture. For inside were displayed the very mundane merchandise upon which Chicago had been built. Even the functional interior shed of the Manufactures

Building was broken up on the floor by hundreds of separate pavilions to exhibit consumer products, all carefully encased in classical, romanesque, gothic and even religious symbolism. These, according to the *Scientific America* magazine were made out of the ubiquitous staff that covered the outside of the buildings.

On the other hand, this should not be terribly surprising because nearly all Chicagoans had for a number of years hired architects to embellish their houses, their new skyscrapers and railway stations, their department stores and warehouses, museums and libraries. Daniel Burnham and John Root had even constructed a formal entrance to the stockyards, the most notorious of the city's industries.

Throughout the United States, the use of professional architecture to celebrate or disguise the purpose of urban buildings had become an expected and familiar part of the city landscape. Those who lived in or travelled to American cities, undoubtedly recognised the symbolism and language of these builders. The dramatic, religious, or classical quotation shaped the way those who built the city decided to present their works. The Chicago Fair's White City not only reflected this commonplace, it carried it one step further, by presenting a unified ensemble. If the quotation of architectural styles was eclectic, the total impression was uniform. The statuary, lagoons, walkways, and general exterior embellishment – in colour, material, and landscape – united these buildings and made the ensemble appear as if it were, in fact, an entire city – or at least the city that mattered.

Official souvenir photo books of the Fair, assembled by C.D. Arnold and A.K. Higinbotham, strove to give the same impression. Taken from long distances, with a generous foreground, these photographs froze the wedding cake styles inside a leisurely, picturesque frame. Few people could be observed and there was little implicit movement. But each building was clearly and cleanly pictured, as whole and impressive as possible. For those amateur photographers who purchased permission to use a camera inside the fairgrounds, there was a booklet that suggested ideal spots, many of them similar to the perspectives Arnold and Higinbotham had captured. Thus the amateur could, with some effort and skill, approximate the vision of the professional.

All this was manipulative, of course, but it reproduced a style, a new genre of photography already familiar to purchasers of Rand McNally's souvenir books of Chicago, published from the early 1890s to the 1920s. In the earliest of these, this important Chicago publisher created a style called the photosketch – an obviously doctored photograph of a Chicago building, shot from a corner angle so that either side of the building faded out along the edges. Taken from a maximum distance (across the intersection of two streets), these photographs had substantial, but empty, foregrounds. This portion of the picture had been conspicuously erased; people, vehicles, dust and the confusion of the city disappeared. In their stead were either a few elegant carriages or a stylish lady and gentleman, sketched in to lend perspective. These photo drawings, like architectural sketches, showed the intention of the building to stand alone as a monument to its self-contained purposes. Simultaneously these photos denied the real life environment, the urban place, which would have defied the intended impression. So it was in the White City.

In some respects, the planners of the Fair achieved their intention of separating culture from commerce in the White City and the Midway. Reactions in some of America's leading elite journals reinforced the message that the White City was a unified cultural ensemble, uncorrupted by commerce or concessions.

An extensive series in the *Nation* magazine over the summer and autumn of 1895 explored

several areas and exhibits of the Fair: its anthropology, art, science, and general impression. Comparing the Chicago Fair to the Paris Exposition of 1889, the journal noted the absolute continuity between exposition and city in France. Chicago, however, was a study in contrasts:

At Chicago you go out of the fairgrounds into a hideous suburb, where the train whisks you away to a grimy, workaday city. Whatever harmony there may be between Chicago and its superb creation is an inner and moral one. We willingly believe, however, that this harmony is real and is in earnest of what the Chicago of the future is to be.

While this might appear a backhanded compliment, for a city with no past to speak of and a careless regard for the present, this abrupt contrast was intended. The White City symbolised an interior reality, a metaphor inside the matter-of-fact world of commerce, slums, and noisy industries.

Other commentary, as in Harpers Weekly celebrated the intentions of the builders. The Administration Building, the journal noted in January before the Fair opened, united sculpture and architecture in a fashion that recalled the achievements of Greek aesthetics. Critic Walter Besant rose to Parnassian heights of metaphor when he described the White City:

[Chicago] has been able to conceive somehow and has carried into execution somehow, the greatest and most poetical dream we have ever seen....Apollo and the Muses with the tinkling of their lyres, drown the bells of the tram and the trolley; the people dream epics. Art and Music and Poetry belong to Chicago.

Such enthusiastic prattle could hardly be expected from every observer. And concentrating on the White City obscured its more popular and vibrant sister city, the Midway, which encompassed all that the White City hoped to supersede. It was crowded, soaked in commercialism with a myriad of cheap amusements. Instead of free entry, most exhibits had multiple tariffs, first for the general exhibit area and then for special features such as dancing, restaurants, and special exhibits. If the White City displayed a universal high culture, the Midway was a setting for specific cultures, each defined by the frame of commercialism.

Rather than a unified, picturesque view, to be absorbed in calm and at leisure, the Midway offered neither quiet nor perspective. A jumble of exhibits and the crush of people made any coherent sense of the place difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Moreover, the entrepreneur, Sol Bloom, hired to reorganise the area, concentrated Middle Eastern exhibits, including dancing, the Street in Cairo, and (he Algerian and Turkish exhibits at the centre of the strip, around the Ferris Wheel. This disrupted whatever anthropological continuities might have been intended by Frederick Putnam, the anthropologist originally placed in charge of the area.

The association of crass commercialism with anthropological exhibits and ethnic restaurants and souvenir stands, was precisely the view of popular culture from which the White City hoped to differentiate itself. Cheap amusements, ethnicity, and commercialism, displayed so openly, underscored a distinction upon which the elite planners of the Fair insisted. Commerce was seen as a corrupting force. This was a strange, even paradoxical, denial of the vital commercial force that made high culture and the arts in Chicago possible. But it was a recognisable assumption of late-Victorian Americans, who made their fortunes and then tried to transform their achievements into the tender of culture through beneficence and city embellishment.

Yet at the Fair, these careful dichotomies quickly deteriorated. The thin presence of staff could scarcely disguise the fact that the display in the White City (particularly in the Manufactures Building) was of, for, and by commerce. If individual items were not offered for sale, company representatives could take orders, make appointments, or direct customers to places where products were available. More important, the commercialism of the Midway began to encroach upon and redefine the White City itself. As the Dial magazine reported in September 1893:

The commercial motive has forced its way to the surface and has become the controlling influence... The object of the Fair is now frankly proclaimed to be that of making as much money for its stockholders. Amusement, of cheap and even vulgar sorts, is being substituted for education, because most people prefer being amused to being instructed.

Harpers Weekly in October, dismissed the notion of scientific and anthropological instruction announced in the guidebooks (at least in those few that discussed the Midway) 'One of the most comic things associated with the Midway', the magazine explained, 'is that theoretically it is a place for scientific investigation. In the catalogue it is set down as part of the department of "anthropology" '.

In fact, the Midway overflowed its confines in two directions. Harpers Weekly noted a 'Barnumizing' of the Fair as a result of pressure to increase attendance. The directors encouraged special days and events that crowded the lake front and the White City with processions, canoe-races and other spectacles. If the 'danse du ventre' (belly dance), the Chinese Dragon, the Ferris Wheel drew people to the fairgrounds, logic demanded that the planners allot more of the grounds to such profitable amusements. From this perspective, the Midway invaded the White City.

A second spill-over of the Midway was into the city streets of Chicago where it blended indistinguishably. The western edge of the fairground outside the Midway featured amusement palaces, souvenir stands, and eateries closely resembling those commercial establishments over the fence. At one point, the Directors implored the city to shut down a particularly competitive diorama in the area. To the south, the Fair attracted the religious fakir, the Reverend John Dowie, who built his first Zion, a faith healing, timber tabernacle on 62nd St. Even the White City was flanked by commercial establishments. As Will Low wrote for Scribners in October, 1893, the approaches were blemished by the 'usual assemblage of cheap shows, lemonade vendors. and the like, which line the unsightly fence and make up what a friend has dubbed the 'Sideway Unpleasant'. Taking the train was a grim reminder of the contrast and continuity between Fair and city: 'with Chicago seven miles away, hidden in a pall of smoke, the White City was at hand'. The best place to view this continuity inside the park was, of course, the Ferris Wheel which offered a unified vision of the Fair and the distant, smokey city, which turned the workaday elevated tramway familiar to most Chicagoans into a high flying amusement.

How, then, can we assess the leakage between the two principal cultures so rigorously separated at the World's Fair? How does this question relate to similar propositions of separation between the city of Chicago and the nation? Some of the commentators suggest an answer: that commerce actually defined the two cultures of the Fair, both the sideshow Midway and the main event White City. Commercial purposes surrounded and underlay the Fair itself – to promote Chicago and its commerce. To deny continuities, to compartmentalise cultures may have suited the great businessmen who financed and ruled the Fair, but there was no preventing the vast audience itself from merging and uniting in experience and

memory what had been set apart spatially. If late nineteenth-century thinkers attempted to popularise a high culture separate from commercialised cheap amusements, in this instance, they were less than successful.

In the city of Chicago and elsewhere throughout the United States, similar efforts met similar results in the decades following the Fair. Daniel Burnham and enthusiastic civic boosters sought to plan for the generic, ideal city, a City Beautiful, which would impose some of the principles of form, aesthetics, and harmony of the Fair onto the city centre. Some of Burnham's plans were instituted in Chicago: parks were built and streets widened. But the civic ensemble where art, refined commerce, transportation, and public institutions would stand shoulder to shoulder was never fully realised.

Similarly, plans to reproduce the Midway in several parks at the outer terminuses of commuter rail lines also failed. The White City Amusement Park in Jackson Park near the old fairgrounds did become a long-term Chicago fixture, with rides, Venetian canals, and spectacular night lighting. But efforts to duplicate this success throughout the city fell short.

The problem lay not in the grandiosity and ambition of these plans, although these were flaws. It was more the narrow vision of Chicago and urban America that they proclaimed. The great, if unintended, lesson of the World's Columbian Exposition was that, in reality, the hierarchies of American culture were weak. The Fair succeeded because of its connections, the ability of visitors to work through this metaphoric display of Chicago, to taste its variety and experience its differences. What made American cities a triumph of excitement and variety in the next decades was the pluralism of culture, so vividly obvious at the World's Fair. If the unresolved struggle among American cultures deeply worried patrons of genteel culture at the end of the century, this contest symbolised the variety that contributed to the sophistication that was to become the hallmark of urban life in the middle of the twentieth century.

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