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World exhibitions

The search for a new identity

In the wake of the 1992 World Exhibition in Seville a balance sheet will have to be drawn up. Two main elements will be considered, both of which will influence the future structure of world exhibitions: the steady increase in the number of such events and the development of new exhibition concepts.

This will involve much extra work for the International Bureau of Expositions (see box) which is responsible for the success of these events, since the present situation contains a number of contradictions.

Valuable publicity

On the one hand a brake must be put on the increasingly rapid succession of exhibitions. Since governments think of these events as excellent publicity opportunities for investment, more and more countries want to host them – even

World Exhibitions

Since 1931, there have been five universal exhibitions: Brussels (1935 and 1958), Montreal (1967), Osaka (1970) and Seville (1992).

Since 1980, there have been seven specialised exhibitions: Nashville (1982), New Orleans (1984), Tsukuba (1985), Vancouver (1986), Brisbane (1988), Osaka II (1990) and Genoa (1992).

The International Bureau of Expositions has authorised four other events to be held between now and the year 2000: Taejon/South Korea (1993), Budapest (1996), Lisbon (1998) and Hanover (2000).

though the costs are extremely high. With both Seville and the Olympic Games, for example, Spain was trying to emphasise its participation in the European single market of 1993.

On the other hand, however, exhibiting countries need new incentives to take part. Many of them are being gradually worn down by the ever more frantic rhythm and cannot keep up financially.

What the future world exhibition looks like will depend largely on the path taken by these mega-exhibitions in their search for a new identity. The idea is to produce a novel type of attraction for the target public, i.e. the stream of visitors, those who actually pay to go in.

No one wants to drop the principle of the world exhibitions as a unique meeting-place for human beings, peoples, nations and cultures, but those responsible are at present striving towards new forms of self-portrayal. The traditional exhibition seems to have lost much of its purpose. We have moved on from the days of the industrial revolution (which was at the origin of the universal exhibition) and the age of competition between states, and we must take account of the increasing access by the public to information. Those responsible are convinced that new ideas and new uses of space – new ways to amaze and overwhelm – must be found. The aim must be to give a glimpse of the many aspects of our planet which are new and special – and still unknown to many of its inhabitants.

Few new ideas at hand

But unhappily this awareness did not bring many new ideas to Seville.

There was a general impression that the national pavilions were horribly alike: general information about the history of the country, followed by counters for travel agencies and economic, technological and industrial promotion bodies. The scene was then bombarded

by endless video films and a whole armoury of slideshows, laser beams, films and holograms. In the midst of the cacophony of obsolescent multi-media demonstrations stood a few showcases containing illustrations expressing little or nothing. And that was it. In most cases the visitor was a mere onlooker and had no opportunity for any sort of physical contact with the exhibition.

A good choice

Against this background the originator of the Swiss pavilion's concept seems to have made the right choice.

By concentrating on art, artists and "the surprising side of Switzerland" stereotypes were avoided. And because of this there were suggestions that it might be taken as a model for future world exhibition pavilions – which was praise indeed!

Marco Domeniconi



Seville: the famous "Telpher" – otherwise few new ideas. (Photo: Keystone)