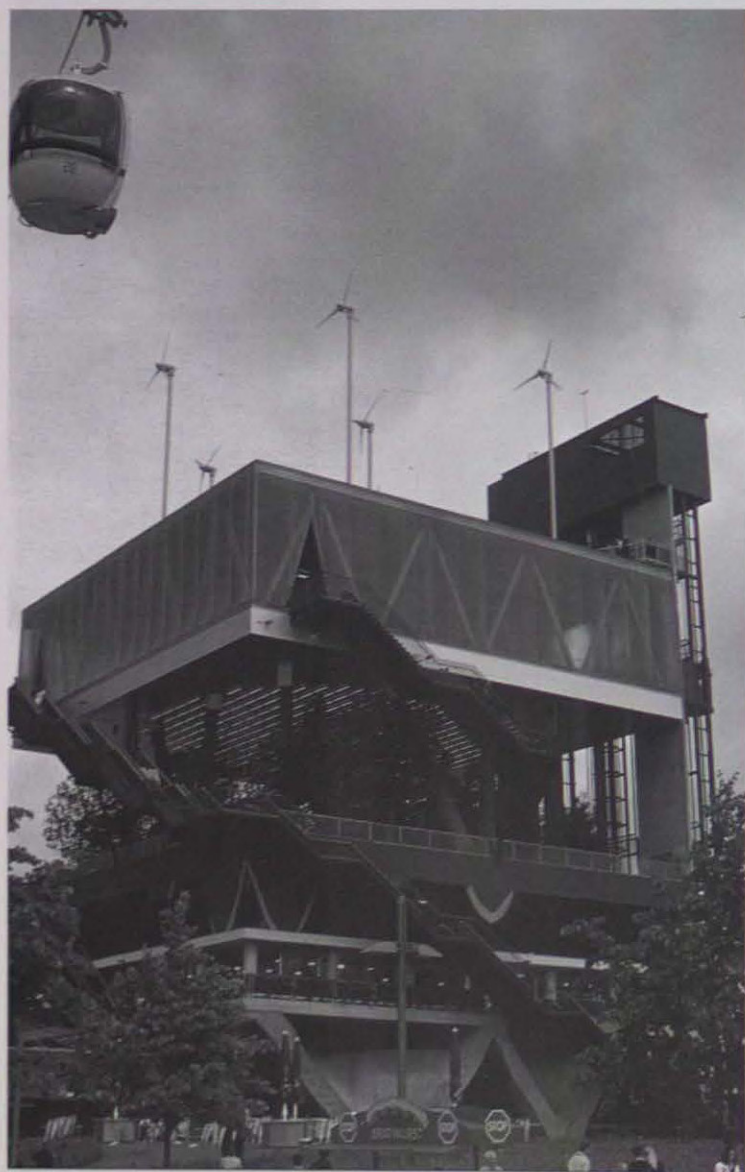


## Expo 2000

Latimer Hu



*Dutch pavilion*

POURING OVER THE latest architectural reviews in the library where I was studying in France, I was convinced that I had to see Expo 2000 in Hanover before heading home. After all, the likes of MVRDV, Peter Zumthor, Toyo Ito, and Jean Nouvel had all contributed to this year's showcase showdown. Beyond the architecture, I was sure that there would be some innovative high-tech junk to see inside the pavilions.

I arrived ridiculously early on a Saturday and was among the first to pass through the Northwest gate. The pavilions of the larger countries and the continents were located in the Northwestern block, as were the five thematic pavilions. Across a wide footbridge over a busy highway, the rectangular Southern arm of the Expo site continued with other country pavilions, including the host's. A funicular line with dangling yellow pods also helped unify the 1.6 million square meter site.

Since the thematic areas were not yet open, the American pavilion seemed a good place to start. I had read somewhere that it was the largest of the pavilions and represented a typical American city. Having not found it among the 190 nations on the board, I was informed that the pavilion did not exist because the funding fell through. How the leader of the free market couldn't afford it was beyond comprehension. In the end, I decided I didn't care to see Mainstreet U.S.A. anyway.

Of course, no American presence meant no American media presence. It came as no surprise that when I told friends I had been to Expo 2000 it was the first time they had heard of it. Despite falling short of the projected 350,000 person daily attendance, the World's Fair organizers and workers felt that it was a relative success. By early afternoon crowds could cause 15-minute line-ups at the more popular pavilions.

MVRDV's much heralded Dutch pavilion drew the longest line-ups. It was tempting to attribute the long wait to the bottleneck caused by only two elevators bringing visitors to the top, where the exhibit began. On the other hand, it may have been the building's outlandish appearance that drew the masses; The building was described in the Expo literature as a five-storey experiment in stacking incongruous forms. The top floor, split diagonally between a pedestrian walk and a "natural" landscape, set up an interesting image: that of a little dune and pond, spilling over a crisp edge with the rooftops of all other Southern section pavilions beyond. Once over the edge, the water trick-

led over the plastic mesh that formed the fifth floor walls. The intent was to mimic gently falling rain, though with high winds and pumping problems the rain would fly off, periodically showering those continuing down the uncovered, exterior stairwell. Immediately below, the forest level almost resembled a true forest, though the foliage seemed rather sparse due to high winds at 20 meters off the ground. The agriculture floor was a greenhouse of bright yellow and red flowers (not tulips), slightly robbed of its organic authenticity by the obviously fake flowers festooning the surrounding fences. Between the forest and greenhouse was a level whose theme and purpose was impossible to divine. The last stop was the ground floor cave, a place where no one would have lingered had it not been for the Heineken stand. Overall, the pavilion was less vivid and surreal than the renderings in all the magazines I had leafed through.

Peter Zumthor's design for the Swiss pavilion also received a lot of press in the architectural reviews. His intent was to create an open box that would let the world in on Switzerland's environmental consciousness. Sadly, he built a lumberyard. What appeared to be dimensioned lumber was stacked with small spacers to a two storey height. These stacks, appearing to lean precariously every which way, were laid together to form sections of parallel and perpendicular corridors. These created, a likely unintended, wind-tunnel effect. In plan, the Swiss pavilion looked like a parquet floor. Headaches were quickly developed after listening to the squeaks of tone-deaf saxophonists and trumpetists hired to lose themselves and play perpetually in the wooden labyrinth. In the pavilion's favor, it should be noted that there were nifty glass tables in the cafette.

Also highly publicized, Shigeru Ban's Japanese pavilion, supported entirely by recycled paper tubes (all to be re-recycled in October) was very true to Expo's theme of man, technology, and nature. Almost too true. Japan's emphases on its novel pavilion and its policies on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were perhaps at the expense of specifically Japanese content; I left learning nothing about Japanese culture, history, or economy. Five little walk-through islands of information, all somehow related to CO<sub>2</sub> technology, were scattered beneath the high undulating roof. Together, they covered only a tenth of the overall floor space.

Iceland's blue cube of perpetually streaming water drew lineups despite being what many critics saw as overly minimalist. Here, unlike the Dutch pa-



*Bent glass tables in the Swiss pavilion.*



*Connection between the roof and wall structures in the Japan pavilion.*



*Inside the Iceland pavilion.*



*Hungarian pavilion.*

vilion's rain landscape, water gently rippling over thick and taut blue mesh produced the effect of silencing the German high schoolers as they entered and became silhouettes moving against a glowing blue backdrop. Moving up the large central spiral ramp, our viewing of a video on the circular screen below was interrupted periodically by a geyser bursting from the floor. The 20-meter pressurized jet of water threatened to wash everyone off the ramp.

Finland's pavilion, dubbed the "Wind Nest" by its architects, Narjus and Siikala, was composed of two dark masses clad in heat-treated wood in which displays of Finnish nature and know-how were organized. Sandwiched between was a serene indoor birch forest through which ran sloping walkways connecting the two sides. Nearby was Hungary's blossoming flower clad in horizontal cedar slats emphasizing the simple curvilinear expression that made it visually stimulating. The two enormous petals contained the museum part of the pavilion while the open-air center, covered by a tensile tarp shielding the sun and rain, was the multi-media locale with gigantic video monitors popping open now and again for shows.

Venezuela's pavilion, though also unmistakably a blossoming flower, was the very definition of kitsch, opening and closing itself mechanically. China's pavilion also fit that bill, covered with a mural of the Great Wall and housing, among other things, a model of the Three Gorges Dam project bathed in pastel blue and pink lights. The Chinese pavilion also had a restaurant, apothecary, and a trinket vendor. This was tame commercialism, however, compared with the Indian pavilion: a small, poorly constructed exhibit entirely surrounded by a strip-mall bazaar.

Alvaro Siza's Portuguese pavilion was a play of colours and materials on a simple L-shaped plan. A limestone wall with "Portugal" etched into it turned a corner to a bold yellow glazed-tile wall, turned another corner to a bold blue glazed-tile wall, and met with a final volume clad in cork. Cork, also covering the entire Spanish pavilion, was a theme-oriented choice as it is an entirely recyclable material (not to mention a novel texture). A large LED screen on the wall of the main hall showed enticing landscape images to spectators seated on small cardboard stools.

The Czech Republic pavilion was an elegant, raised parallelepiped made of thin, wood frames. Inside were intriguing works by Czech artists such as the large, hollow, open cylinder composed of stacked

books by Matel Kren. The Latvian Pavilion was also remarkable in its simplicity. Rudimentary frames of rough-hewn pine held transparent, plastic panels around the main walls. The central attraction was an inverted square pyramid made of four thatched roofs that meet the observer in the middle and framed the sky above. Estonia's roof of waving potted pine trees and Lithuania's futuristic yellow volume were also inventive beyond what was expected of these small Eastern European nations, of which little is seen or heard in the architectural glossies.

The host country, always obliged to do something cool, set their pavilion in the plaza, a traffic hub at the end of the footbridge. The German pavilion was an enormous exercise in glass as both cladding and structure. Inside, one of the first displays features Mies Van der Rohe, a modest panel with a freehand portrait and some of his sketches below. The celebrated architect looked stern, especially beside the smiling bust of Einstein, disappointed, perhaps, by the pavilion's extravagantly curved glass walls. Visitors were ushered onto a series of catwalks cutting through a dark abyss. A multi-media montage depicting days-in-the-lives of contemporary Germans was projected onto monstrous screens covering the walls, ceiling, and floor of the five-storey volume – delicious eye-candy.

Two of the most compelling projects at Expo this year were on religious themes. The Christ pavilion, funded jointly by the Protestant Church of Germany and the German Bishops' Conference, and designed by von Gerkan, Marg und Partner, was intensely meditative, even though it was situated directly across from the busy German pavilion and noisy open square. The cloisters surrounding the inner court and the sacred room forced visitors to assume a slow pace in order to admire the fascinating light effects. The double glazed wall panels were filled with unusual objects, natural and man-made, paired vertically. Where the bottom panel was filled with wood shavings, the top was packed with metal shavings. Thistles, bamboo, forks, light bulbs, syringes, cattails, clamshells, created large patches of dappled and slightly coloured light as the sun shone through the windows. The 18 meter high sacred room was clad in a translucent marble veneer, providing a well-lit worship space with fine acoustics for the *a cappella* choirs invited to sing there. The floor of the crypt, or the Room of Stillness, was of fine-grained white sand, in which the shoe-prints of pilgrims were recorded. Anyone sorry



LED screen and cardboard chairs in Sisa's Portugal pavilion.



The interior of the Estonia pavilion.



Christ pavilion.

to have missed seeing the Christ pavilion at Expo will be happy to know that it was also built for easy dismantling; it is to be re-erected eventually in the Thuringian Volkenroda Monastery. Meanwhile, The Vatican, not to be outdone, also built a contemplative space of quality craftsmanship. The Holy See pavilion was a circular, one-storey exhibit, built largely of wood with natural lighting controlled by vertical floor-to-ceiling louvre panels. Clean lines and fine detailing were evident throughout. However, its location at the low-traffic butt of the West entrance was a bit unfortunate.

Toyo Ito and Jean Nouvel were amongst the architects responsible for other theme pavilions. Ito designed the Health pavilion; Nouvel, the Future of Work pavilion. Both of these were built in existing warehouse-like edifices. Ito's was a semicircular room (seemingly circular due to a large mirrored wall) in which dozens of state-of-the-art recliners were positioned. Images and text on aging and other health issues were projected on the curved wall while the recliners gently rocked the participants. The five-minute rocking was so therapeutic that I pressed the button again and extended my power nap (by then I had already walked a great deal).

Jean Nouvel's design forced visitors to make the journey up a long flight of stairs then down what appeared to be an endless curving ramp before reaching, finally, the sitting area. Compared to Ito's Lazy-Boys, the benches in the Future of Work pavilion were cold and hard. The show, however, was a good cabaret. Modern dancers dressed in different work uniforms, some holding LED panels with scrolling texts voicing the angst of job seekers worldwide, paraded around on three levels of scaffolding lining the walls of the oval room.

And what of Canadian content? Back in my French host town, on the shelves of the school library, between glossy magazines, were backissues of *The Fifth Column*. In an interview in one old issue, John

Bland describes, with a fair measure of shame, the Canadian pavilion at an Expo he had visited. While other countries produced captivating, modern architecture free of literal representation, Canada presented a grain elevator packed full of stereotypes. This year's installment was tragically similar, minus the grain elevator. The first part of the exhibit, in an Expo warehouse with a big maple leaf beacon on the corner, was a virtual river made up of hundreds of monitors underfoot playing the same image of streaming water. The river snaked about images of Canadian jobs and a glamourized multi-ethnicity before arriving at the main show: fountain works supposedly timed to a video feed projected on suspended screens. We were ushered out with a traditional Inuit dance and animated polar bears talking about the environment from computer terminals. True, it did its job of exposing Canada to the world, and some stereotypes are simply benign, but how effective was it in creating favourable and lasting memories compared to the many other well-built and innovative architectural experiments?

The World's Fair has always been a place where countries endeavour to outdo each other architecturally by commissioning their best architects, and where the very cutting edge of science and technology are manifested in built form. Take for example Paxton's Crystal Palace, which showed the possibility of ephemeral structures built totally with glass; Eiffel's tower, the first ironwork of that size and stature; or even Mies' German Pavilion, a minimalist masterpiece so profound it was rebuilt more than sixty years after it was demolished. The buildings which have earned fame at World's Fairs have always spoken of man, nature and technology: the theme elements of Expo 2000, and the very foundations of architecture itself.

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*A fish phonebooth; not much more to say!*