



# FOUNDATION EXPO '88

*'Progressing the World Expo 88 Vision'*

*- A non-government not-for-profit entity celebrating Brisbane's World Expo'88 -*

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**The Bug/Independent – August 2005**

## **Have expos expired?**

**Remember the fun we all had at Brisbane's World Expo 88? While on holiday in Japan recently JIM FORBES visited Expo 2005 at Nagoya and came away disappointed and questioning the future of such showcases.**

World Fairs were once the major events on the global calendar – bold showcases of the wonders of the industrial age. Part-trade show, part-festival, international expositions were the stages on which nations jostled for prestige, showing off the best their engineers, architects, scientists and artists could conjure up, in a spirit of competitive internationalism.

Many of life's mod-cons – electricity, motor cars, lifts and telephones – had their premieres at past expos. Ironically, advances in technology, which the international exposition movement evolved to promote, have over the decades eroded its relevance.

Jet travel, mass tourism and now the internet – where any corner of the globe is just a mouse-click away – have all reduced the significance of the expo. Seventeen years after Brisbane's Expo '88 boasted that “together we'll show the world”, the hosts of the first expo of the 21st century – Nagoya, Japan – are having trouble even raising the interest of their compatriots, let alone the rest of the planet.

Surveys immediately prior to Expo 2005's opening in March found less than half of Tokyo's residents had heard of the event, and most of those that had, weren't planning to attend.

One of Japan's previous expos in Osaka in 1970 attracted more than 64 million visitors. Expo 2005 will struggle to draw a quarter of that number.

Still, the show must go on. Based in Aichi prefecture, 40 minutes outside Nagoya, Expo 2005 runs until September 25. The event's theme is “Beyond development: Rediscovering nature's wisdom”.

Japan is better known for its electronics than environmentalism, so on a recent visit I was keen to see whether Expo 2005 was the “bold fusion of traditional wisdom with modern science and technology” promised by the promotional material. What I found was something blander than bold, with green credentials a little grey around the edges.

From the outset, Aichi's expo plans were dogged by environmental controversy. After losing the 1988

Summer Olympics to Seoul, local authorities desperate to develop the Nagoya Hills turned to the idea of an expo. The original proposal released in 1994 involved levelling much of the Kaisho Forest and replacing it with a massive housing development after the fair. Local and international environmental groups were outraged, pointing out the threat the plan posed to endangered goshawk and flying squirrel populations.

After a decade-long struggle, the authorities backed down. The housing plan was scrapped, and part of the site relocated.

Nevertheless, Expo 2005's construction has still had a profound impact on the local environment. Far from being "beyond development", the event required an orgy of construction. All facilities including water, sewerage, road and rail connections had to be built from scratch – extravagant investments for a six-month carnival.

The magnetic-levitation rail line erected to ferry patrons from Nagoya to the expo site came at the cost of millions of dollars and vast hectares of pristine forest. As Expo 2005 is in a largely undeveloped region, the "Linimo" will be a long line to nowhere once the gates to this celebration of the "marvellous mechanism of nature" close.

On site, conspicuous consumption abounds. Stores, kiosks and roving vendors proliferate, thrusting official merchandise onto patrons in a frenzy of souveniring. Visitors are banned from taking in their own food, forced to buy take-aways in disposable boxes if they want to eat.

There is some evidence of environmental consciousness. Pedal-powered taxis ferry visitors around the site, while toilets and bathrooms use water-saving technology. Most visits to the site are via public transport, either on the maglev rail or shuttle bus services. And the recycling effort is stupendous – marshals swarm around garbage bins, ordering patrons to sort rubbish into one of seven waste streams. Of course, waste management would be simplified were visitors allowed to bring picnics in reusable containers.

Other green gimmicks, such as the Bio-Lung, a giant frame draped in living plants, are no replacement for the acres of woodland sacrificed for Expo 2005's development.

The disconnection between theme and reality is graphically underscored by the site's dominant feature, the Wheel of Wonder – an enormous ferris wheel sponsored by Japan's Automobile Manufacturers' Association and dedicated to the glory of the car. It's little wonder Japan's three major environmental organisations withdrew support for Expo in the week before it opened.

Green pretence aside, what of Expo 2005 as an event? I found the experience uninspiring, more fun park than world fair.

Pavilion design is an example of the expo movement's waning significance.

Past expos were opportunities for architectural statements – Melbourne's World Heritage-listed Royal Exhibition Hall and the Eiffel Tower are two iconic examples.

Aichi's pavilions look like they were inspired by big-box retail outlets. Most are blunt, blocky structures, more like a Bunnings than an expression of architectural innovation.

The displays inside are a mixed bag of confusing abstraction, hi-tech gimmickry and hokey cliché.

The Australian pavilion is a line-up of the usual suspects: re-heated Olympics iconography (more Hills Hoists and Victa lawnmowers), a smattering of indigenous content and a giant platypus, the point of which escaped me and perplexed Japanese visitors. There's no escaping the souvenir shop though.

During my visit, one official hissed at an underling to close a side door "to stop patrons leaking out" before they'd had a chance to spend. Of the three knick-knacks I picked up, two were made in China and one Indonesia. Global village, indeed.

As it is, the real crowd-pulling displays at this expo aren't national, but multinational. Elaborate corporate pavilions from heavyweights Toyota, Hitachi and Fujitsu tower over national displays, both in size and attraction. On the day of my visit, waits for most national pavilions ranged from walk-in to 45 minutes. Access to the Toyota pavilion, one of the largest on site, meant queuing for two to three hours.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy parts of my day at Expo 2005. The sky-gondola ride across the site and

surrounding forest was breathtaking, and while I couldn't bear the kilometre-long queue waiting to see the preserved Siberian mammoth, from all reports it's quite amazing.

Yet instead of leaving Expo 2005 energised by a dynamic vision of a sustainable future, I felt like I'd spent the day at Dreamworld – empty and exhausted after a feast of bad take-away and big dumb fun.

In the end, “rediscovering nature's wisdom” is another example of the spin that dominates contemporary commerce and politics. If the local authorities had truly wished to celebrate Japan's dwindling natural environment rather than just paint a green face on a regional economic project, Expo 2005 would never have been built.

The real motives for the event are probably better understood from Aichi's prefectural slogan.

Plastered all over the approaches to the event's front gates, it's a frank declaration of intent, and a perfect motto for corporate and political shysters everywhere: “Aichi: Basic & Ambitious.”

**The Bug/Independent – Sept 2005**

## **A different way of looking at the world**

**Following the opinion piece in our previous edition questioning the future of world expositions, expo expert JOHN MCGREGOR leaps to their defence and says technology means the events can gain a wider worldwide audience.**

World expositions, like the Olympics, are catalysts for great social and economic development – not only at the level of the host city itself, but also in terms of facilitating exchange among participating nations and corporations as well as the visiting public whether they be local residents, inter-state tourists or international visitors.

We look to world expositions as heralds of world peace, and, at the same time, as beacons of a more prosperous and convenient future. In that sense, the expo movement has not changed since the commonly accepted first exposition of the modern era held 1851 at the Crystal Palace, London.

Since then, the world expositions movement has been embraced by those nations at the forefront of industrial and technological progress – enthusing and educating their citizens, and at the same time welcoming those from afar who may not share their value systems, language or culture to join in celebrating a more open and tolerant future. As renowned Japanese architect and planner for the first expo to be held in Asia – the 1970 Universal Exposition at Osaka, Japan – Kenzo Tange said: “The primary aim of a modern exposition is to bring together in one place people from every part of the world who represent the wisdom and culture of all mankind, and to allow them to meet and to exchange ideas and emotions.”

So, has the advent of the “tele-industrialised” or “@ world” promoted through the expositions movement itself – where distance and geography seem irrelevant to information experience – led to the lesser importance of world expositions?

No, I don't believe so.

World expositions, in a nutshell, are still about personal experience – how we view others – and more importantly, how we represent and how we view ourselves. Of course, we can all argue that our own World Expo '88 – the bicentenary's \$600million dollar festival and second in importance only to the opening of Canberra's new Parliament House – was a waste of time and money. But how did it change our perception of ourselves, and how we are perceived, by those from overseas, and those overseas?

Indeed, if world expositions are to be measured on a “goodwill” index, I am sure that Brisbane's World Expo would receive a top mark. It presented us as a modern, forward-thinking nation, unfettered by our convict chains, confident of a new rapprochement with our indigenous past, and one that was willing to engage the world anew on our southern – and somewhat distant – shores.

Indeed, the telephone, fax machine, and internet have not impeded mankind's desire to interact with others. Instead they have given us a better base from which to understand and exchange with others not so close – or close to – home.

World expositions of the 21st century take place in a new world environment where on a daily – and “real-time” – basis the difference between finding out about local news and international news seems to have blurred. Where via an internet cafe anyone with \$1 in their pocket can read today’s New York Times just as easily as The Courier-Mail.

Indeed, should I so wish and desire, I can find out all the details of this year’s expo in Japan, and our Australian representation there, without going to Japan. Quite ironic. So, why go to Japan?

Cameras at every Olympic Games are a commonplace item these days – yet this does not in any sense weaken the solidarity and purpose of the Olympic movement. It seems to have become a hallmark of citizenship of the new world that we have all come to expect to be able to watch – and thereby partake in – the opening ceremony of the Games. Indeed the worldwide “tele-audience” of the Games far exceeds – by hundreds of millions – the physical capacity of the venue stadium.

So what is it all about?

Eventually I believe that participation in an event in any form – whether through physical “bums on seats” at the venue, via television, or the internet – shall be the key determining factor of the enjoyment and success of an international event.

Of course, hosts will still need to charge for participation – regardless of method of access. However, this, as already occurs, may be more than well compensated in terms of advertising revenue. We do not expect to pay to watch the Olympics in our own homes – or to view web-camera images of people enjoying their walk on the grand Global Loop promenade that encircles the 2005 World Expo site. Yet, the concept is the same.

Already we can see how the proliferation of the internet – still, I should caution, the province of the more developed and prosperous suburbs of our most developed nations on the planet – has led to greater public participation in a wide variety of events, both local and international.

Whether that be my online participation in the Beverley Hill’s (California) Sculpture Garden Walk, or viewing the real-time attendance at the Australia Pavilion at Expo 2005 via the pavilion’s webcam, I believe eventually internet participation will be as important, if not more important, than individual participation at the event level.

After all, only 10 or so persons may take part in the Beverley Hills walk, but via the internet, the numbers could range from 10 to 10 million.

Coupling this interactive participation with viewing of sponsors’ advertisements makes it even more compelling for those who work in events industries to take stock of the present and growing importance of the “virtual visitor” in tomorrow’s world.

Indeed, by 2020, just 15 years from now, we may very well see expos marketed in the same way as Olympics Games, with far greater audience awareness, greater impact, and tailoring of the expo experience – from purchasing official expo merchandise online, to interactive web-cams that take you from entrance gates to inside every pavilion.

Furthermore, the “virtual visit” shall be pollution-free and information-rich – enabling each visitor to tap into hyperlinked references for every pavilion exhibit, guiding the webcam via personal controls and zooming in to areas of interest, with interactive “avatar” guides to suggest, entertain, and inform.

So, should we visit World Expo 2005 Japan? It is as simple as typing [www.expo2005.or.jp](http://www.expo2005.or.jp) – and you are there! Of course, if you wish to order sushi with your visit, you may have to make a telephone call to your nearest take-away provider. But apart from that, I sincerely believe the world expositions experience is here to stay – and will be coming to you very shortly via your internet-TV-phone.

*John McGregor worked as a guide at Expo '88's Japanese Pavilion. He has also worked at the 1992 Seville Expo in Spain, and at South Korea's Taejon International Exposition in 1993. In 2002 he participated in the World Expositions Conference in Seville. He established Foundation Expo'88 to celebrate the heritage of Brisbane's World Expo. The foundation website is at [www.foundationexpo88.org](http://www.foundationexpo88.org).*

**Foundation Expo '88 - Note:**

*The Foundation logo as used on this document reflects the correct position of World Expo '88 as an Australian world exposition. It also refers to the aspect of the familiar and popular inflatable plastic globe that took its pride of place a top of the World Expo '88 River Stage for the six months of the World Expo, as noted in picture below.*

*The logo as used on the Foundation web-pages is the same icon – however in a revolving animated format – representing the new global outreach of World Expo '88 via its commemorative presence on the World-Wide Web – at the Foundation Expo '88 web-site <http://www.foundationexpo88.org>.*



*Preface to the Official Closing Ceremony of World Expo '88 – at the World Expo '88 River Stage – 30 October 1988.  
Brisbane River and skyline appear behind. The building on right of the image is the State Parliament of Queensland and Annexe.  
Image BCC-T120-1839  
Courtesy of Brisbane City Council*