
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Building a Century of Progress: The Architecture of Chicago's 1933-34 World's Fair* by Lisa D. Schrenk

Review by: Joanna Merwood-Salisbury

Source: *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Apr., 2008), pp. 476-477

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press and the Society for the History of Technology

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40061536>

Accessed: 11-12-2018 22:34 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press, Society for the History of Technology are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Technology and Culture*

wheel, seeing the U.S.A. in your Chevrolet, but seated in a domed luxury railroad car.

JEFF SCHRAMM

Dr. Schramm is assistant professor of history at Missouri University of Science and Technology in Rolla. He is completing a manuscript about the dieselization of the American railroad system.

APRIL

2008

VOL. 49

Building a Century of Progress: The Architecture of Chicago's 1933–34 World's Fair.

By Lisa D. Schrenk. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Pp. x+357. \$39.95.

The “Century of Progress” World’s Fair is a poor stepchild among the great international exhibitions of the modern era. Its name conjures up no defining image, and there is no substantial body of scholarship surrounding it. Lisa Schrenk’s book aims to correct this by placing the fair in relation to the discussion about modern architecture taking place in the United States, and to a lesser degree in Europe, during the interwar period. It is a well-researched, well-written, and well-illustrated book that will appeal mostly to architectural historians, but also to those historians of technology interested in building construction. Schrenk lays out the process of conceptualizing and realizing the fair, discusses the design of individual pavilions (especially the popular “ideal homes” exhibits with their innovative domestic technologies), and concludes with a look at the reception of the fair and an assessment of its influence.

As Schrenk freely admits, the aesthetic impact of the Century of Progress was limited. Architecturally it failed to provide an iconic expression to rival the Eiffel Tower at the Paris Exposition of 1889, or Buckminster Fuller’s United States Pavilion at Expo ’67 in Montreal. Instead, she argues, the fair demonstrated the plurality of definitions of modern architecture operational in the United States. She emphasizes the role the fair played in introducing and promoting building materials, structures, and construction technologies that would come into widespread use after World War II, including suspended roofs, thin concrete shells, mass-produced prefabricated panel systems, and “disposable” housing. Since the fair’s theme was the “betterment of mankind through advances in scientific technology,” its organizers were particularly anxious to demonstrate the changes to the built environment brought about by these technologies, as well as by neon lighting, air-conditioning, and various new electrical appliances.

While these two points—about aesthetic diversity and technological innovation—are thoroughly and effectively argued, Schrenk has unfortunately missed the opportunity to situate the Century of Progress in its

immediate context. The fair was constructed on the South Side of Chicago at a moment of economic crisis. As Carl Condit has shown, in the 1930s the tall office buildings in the downtown Loop were being demolished, victims of a Depression-era economy in which they did not pay. At the same time, architects and planners began a series of institutional and public-housing projects aimed at reinvigorating the impoverished South Side. Despite the desperate need for new urban visions for the skyscraper city, and for the South Side, the fair provided few answers. An emphasis in the early planning stages on a complex, integrated transportation system, extending both horizontally and vertically, was not carried through to the final design, which was instead made up of small isolated pavilions in the art deco style, only loosely related to each other or to the rest of the city. While the explorations of modern dwelling were innovative in their use of materials, they were restricted to suburban single-family housing.

Building a Century of Progress describes the varied aims of the committee of architects responsible for the fair (including Paul Cret, Raymond Hood, and Harvey Wiley Corbett) but stops short of interrogating their failure to provide a more meaningful example of urban design. Together with Hugh Ferriss, Hood and Corbett had been responsible for a remarkable series of proposals in the 1920s, haunting nocturnal visions of a future American city incorporating skyscraper megastructures. The Chicago fair did nothing to promote those visions, much less realize them. Instead it was Rockefeller Center in New York (designed by a committee of many of the same members, but with a single, wealthy client) that became the iconic and influential symbol of American architecture and urbanism in the 1930s.

This book is valuable for its comprehensive presentation of the Century of Progress as an advertising mechanism demonstrating the possibilities of modern architecture to the wider public, and for its focus on new building technologies. However, the issues of politics and patronage that determined the final urban form of the fair are left implicit. Private firms, many of which were also exhibitors, paid for the fair. In the end the designers involved simply could not afford to present a radical new architectural vision. The economic success of the fair depended on the presentation of a wide range of consumer products, not the solution to larger problems of urban design.

JOANNA MERWOOD-SALISBURY

Dr. Merwood-Salisbury is associate chair of the Department of Architecture, Interior Design and Lighting at Parsons The New School for Design in New York City, and she is the author of a forthcoming book titled *Chicago 1890: The Skyscraper as Urban Solution*.