
Copyright © 2004 (Please consult author).

This is the author’s version of the work. It is posted here with permission of the publisher for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted. If your Library has a subscription to this journal, you may also be able to access the published version via the library catalogue.
Australian design at Expo ’70, Osaka

In the history of industrial design in Australia, early British influence gave way to American influence in the late nineteenth-century. This transition was clear by WWII as America became the dominant design voice in Australia’s war effort. In the peacetime of 1948 the new American-inspired Holden motorcar showed this influence on the streets with its large ‘streamlined’ body and prominent chrome grille. In peoples’ houses, however, a new source of influence was emerging. Japanese craft and industrial design practice offered an alternative to the dominant British and American hegemonies of taste and this was especially evident in electronic goods and cars.

For many Westerners, exposure to Japanese culture and values occurred through media reports of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Six years later in Osaka, an important event for showcasing world design was held.

The Japan World Exposition held in Osaka in 1970 was the first official Asian world exhibition. One had been planned for Tokyo in 1940 but was cancelled by the Expo governing body because of Japan’s attack on China.1 The central theme of Expo ’70 was ‘Progress and harmony for mankind’.2 The symbol of the cherry blossom reflected this theme and was even used as the inspiration for the design of Japanese buildings at the show. Expo ’70 was Japan’s way of presenting itself to the world - this event may well have introduced many Westerners to Japanese culture for the first time. According to contemporary accounts of the event in the magazine American Artist, more than seventy countries participated with an estimated 50 million attendees3. There was much media interest and the front covers of several international magazines featured Expo imagery.

The Japanese Pavilion.

As at the previous event in Montreal in 1967 (see Australiana November 2003), the central theme at Osaka was of increased environmental awareness: ‘the problems of urbanisation, over-population, and pollution of the environment are shared [by all nations]’.4 To this end Expo ’70 was seen as a chance to help provide some answers to these global problems. The Expo site was presented as a “city of the future” and offered suggestions for the harmonious relationship between vital modern technology (such as a computerised traffic control system), and the more human values provided by artists and designers. Together, it was argued, the two approaches of science

---

1 Allwood. The Great Exhibitions. p. 176.
and the arts would provide pleasure to human life in the complex modern city.\(^5\)

The second message Japan was trying to express to the world was that it was a nation rooted in the past but eager to explore the future. An example of this was the Furukawa Group’s Pavilion where a traditional-looking pagoda in fact housed an enormous computer.\(^6\) An exhibition of Japanese folk crafts entitled *Japan: 100 Years* stressed both aspects of Japan - ‘tradition’ and ‘the future’. One senses from reading contemporary American reviews of *Expo ’70* that the contradiction between centuries’ old crafts activities practised along-side modern technologies was one that puzzled spectators from Western countries. For example, one American critic referred to what she called ‘the paradox between tradition and modernism.’\(^7\) Traditional handicrafts were not generally drawn upon as a source for modern manufactures and industry in Western countries at this time as they were in Japan.

Despite the emphasis on environmental themes and the importance of tradition, *Expo ’70* did not preclude the participation of Japan’s leading heavy manufacturers. Several spectacular corporate exhibits such as the Japanese Pavilion of Gas Industry, a building that looked similar to a huge turbine, and the Toshiba Pavilion reflected the industrial might of Japanese manufacturers at a time when they were coming to dominate Australian and other world consumer markets.\(^8\) While Japan’s *Expo* extolled lofty ideals, propaganda was alive and well between the world’s leading economic powers as it had been at all previous *world expositions*. The *American Pavilion* boasted of technological conquest with displays of a lunar capsule and rocks brought back from the moon.\(^9\) For its part, the *Soviet Pavilion* was an appropriately totalitarian and very ‘male’ thrusting shape, complete with a huge portrait of Lenin inside. Other countries’ pavilions reflected their chief economic activities. The *British Columbia Monument* was constructed entirely from timber, a major Canadian export, while the *Swiss Pavilion* was a spectacular building constructed largely from glass.

**The Australian Pavilion - rural and extractive industries vs. engineering and manufacturing.**

If the 240 orange and green Featherston *Expo ‘67 Talking Chairs* were successful ‘messages’ of Australian industrial design and manufacturing vigour, and the paintings of Williams, Olsen and others spoke of a vibrant ‘modern’ Australian culture at *Expo ‘67*, then the single strongest ‘object’ at *Expo ’70* was the *Australian Pavilion* itself.\(^10\) An illustration in a contemporary

---

\(^5\)Ibid.

\(^6\)Ibid., p. 25.

\(^7\)Ibid.

\(^8\)This was especially true in the electronic consumer goods area - and recent success in Australian motoring rallies assured consumers Japanese cars, too, were worthy alternatives to big local Holdens and Fords. Cars are explored in Paper 8

\(^9\)Vanderwall. ‘EXPO ‘70.’ p. 79.

\(^10\)A historian can only be guided by available contemporary documentation. While most of the media reports of *Expo ‘67* focus on the innovation of the Featherstons’ *Expo Sound Chairs*, similar media
Walkabout magazine depicted a model of the extraordinary engineering involved in the Australian Pavilion - a building was suspended from a 128 feet high arm known as the ‘sky-hook’.

In order to assess the image of national identity Australia was projecting to the world, a review of the Osaka exhibits is necessary. In his role of events architect, Robin Boyd made various ‘Proposals for the exhibitions’:


Subject-theme 2: Man and Nature contained another 4 exhibits. Exhibit 5: Australian invention in agricultural technology, Exhibit 6: Soil and water, Exhibit 7: Exploiting and preserving resources, Exhibit 8: Exploring the universe, Exhibit 9: Utilisation of polar regions.


Subject-theme 4: Man and Man contained 5 exhibits. Exhibit reports of Expo ’70 dwell on the engineering and manufacture of the ‘sky-hook’ itself, and not of the display of industrial design products which made up one of the 19 categories of exhibits within.


12 ‘Highlights of modern Australian medical science. The work of Professor Florey, Sir MacFarlane Burnett, Sir Norman Gregg, etc....immunology, virus vaccines, rubella and cancer research - shown in animated diagrammatic demonstrations.’ Ibid.

13 ‘Neurological and brain research at the ANU demonstrated in an automatic working model. Ibid.

14 ‘Australia’s active sporting life. Children’s play. Swimming, tennis, skiing, fishing, cricket, football, car-racing, golf, hiking, sailing, riding, etc. (but not spectator sports) shown in a vivid optical presentation combining film and stills.’ Ibid.

15 ‘Wheat Stripper Machine, 1843; Stump Jump Plough, 1876; H.V. McKay Harvester, 1884; Sheep Shearing Machine, 1885; Subterranean Clover, 1889; Rotary Hoe, 1920; 90-Mile Desert transformation, 1941-45; Cobalt Bullet, 1957; Mechanised cheese production, 1958 etc....to the latest developments of agricultural mechanisation in 1970 - all shown in simulated working models or diagrams.’ Ibid.

16 ‘CSIR’s rainmaking, 1947...Solar distillation, Coober Pedy, 1967. Desalination developments to 1970 - all shown in animated models or diagrams.’ Ibid.

17 ‘The Snowy Mountains Scheme, demonstrated by animated diagrams and locality model.’ Ibid.

18 ‘Australian radio and optical astronomy, shown in models of the Parkes radio-telescope and the new 150 [foot] one focused respectively on a night ‘sky’ overhead including the clouds of Magellan and the Southern Cross) and demonstrating simultaneous sound reception and visual images respectively, from a quasar in the ‘sky’.’ Ibid.

19 ‘Australia’s Antarctic work, with reference to international co-operation in the region.’ Ibid.


21 ‘Australian industrial design and manufacture of consumer goods: appliances, food products, housing, furniture, equipment, fabrics, carpets - demonstrated in a stylised, idealised, full-size model of the heart of a modern Australian family home: interior of living room, kitchen, bedroom, playroom, sun-terrace, etc., fully furnished and being ‘lived in’ by cartoon figures.’ Ibid.

22 ‘The Australian suburban way of life; its origins late last century. Ideal suburbs. A new town, e.g. Belconnen, ACT, shown in model form.’ Ibid.

The historical survey of ‘Australia’s invention in agricultural technology’ revealed in Exhibit 5 no doubt revealed a proud tradition of working the land but it is rather surprising to see such a high emphasis on agricultural implements in 1970. Nonetheless, this ‘historical’ display with its implications of an agrarian society was balanced by the displays of high technology (astronomy equipment) and ambitious engineering projects (the Snowy Mountains Scheme) and automotive technology, including the world-beating Repco-Brabham Formula One racing car engine. This image was furthered by displays of consumer goods, mineral wealth, and by the daring engineering of the ‘sky-hook’ pavilion itself. Through all of this came a further declaration of the self-image Australia had promoted at Montreal three years earlier. Then, modern painting carried much of the new national identity. Three years on, high technology, industrial design and mineral exploration moved the official presentation of national identity away from its old agrarian basis.

The history of Australia’s participation in world expositions at home and abroad raises a contradiction regarding Australia’s changing sense of national identity. Australia hosted many major exhibitions in the 19th century while still a British colony. After Federation in 1901, one might have expected Australia to proudly host another world exhibition, but no such event took place. The last official world exhibition Australia hosted before Federation was the 1897 Queensland International Exhibition in Brisbane. A century passed before another official event - World Expo 88 in Brisbane - was held in this country. At the very least, one might have expected Australia to occupy its own display space when exhibiting abroad. It fact, it was not until 1967 in Montreal that Australia presented itself to the world as a modern, independent nation with its own Pavilion.

---

24 ‘Australian writing and publishing, featuring especially books with associations with Japan, and those explaining Australia in illustrations.’ Ibid.
25 ‘Radio Australia; Radio School of the Air; a language school - demonstrating the teaching of Japanese in Australia. All shown in visual effects and with synchronised sounds.’ Ibid.
26 ‘Painting will be represented by contrasting images of the Australian landscape in traditional, Impressionist and contemporary styles. (N.B. More comprehensive exhibitions of Australian art - including aboriginal - will be held from time to time in the dispersal hall. Music will be represented throughout the exhibits tunnel by Australian compositions appropriate to each display: from symphonic pieces by the Sydney or Melbourne Symphony Orchestra to popular music.’ Ibid.
27 ‘Theatre, ballet, entertainments, shown in visual displays with synchronised sound. A glimpse at new media in graphic arts: electronic or laser images may be demonstrated by automatically programmed machines.’ Ibid.
28 ‘A series of graphic, animated charts and models, showing the contrasts between the two countries; in size, geography, climate, population density, labour force distribution, etc....And the links between the two; trades routes, sea and air routes, communication satellite, exchange students and cultural programmes, democratic institutions.’ Ibid.
29 ‘A series of small, continuously running screens will show Australia’s pioneering in making the world’s first feature films; Soldiers of the Cross; The Story of the Kelly Gang, 1906; then glimpses of other comedy and melodrama films of the 1910’s and 20’s and 30’s...’ Ibid.
The Expos of 1967 and 1970 were revisionist moments for the projection of national identity abroad. In 1967, in its own Pavilion for the first time, the country showed a truer reflection of the diversity of its activities. The event three years later in Osaka furthered this new Australian confidence. The old dependence upon Britain and America seemed to have disappeared, but there was a growing deference to Japan as a third economic partner to whom Australia would defer.