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The role of the International Exposition, Exhibition, World’s Fair and Expo in the promotion of the art and design of the Northern Hemisphere has been much explored. Less well known is Australia’s participation at overseas events. For example, the Australian Pavilion at Montreal’s Expo’67 included live kangaroos and several hundred talking chairs! Dr Simon Jackson from the Faculty of Design, Swinburne University of Technology investigates...

**Australian talking chairs at Expo ‘67**

Held in Montreal, Expo ‘67 was a reaction against the commercialism of the 1964 New York World’s Fair. Whereas the American event had been little more than a huge carnival, the Canadian event attempted to be an educational and cultural event. This lofty ambition may be seen in the theme - ‘Man and His World’ - inspired by a quotation from writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery: ‘To be a man is to be convinced that one is taking a hand in building the world’. According to one critic, Expo ‘67 raised the following vital point - that the ‘problems of urbanisation, over-population, and pollution of the environment are shared [by all nations]’. It was hoped that subsequent world exhibitions would arrive at shared answers. Despite this emphasis on education at the Canadian event, the other aspects common to world exhibitions - propaganda and trade - were again in evidence. Photographs published in *Life* magazine of the interior of the American Pavilion with the Apollo capsule and parachutes and the extraordinary Geodesic Dome itself reveal the aggressive propaganda of the world’s ‘super-power’ nations was hard to stop.

The Australian Pavilion.

Expo ‘67 was the first event at which Australia exhibited abroad as an independent country with its own exhibition space. Australia’s previous participation in a major international exhibition had been at the New York World’s Fair three decades earlier as a part of the British Pavilion. Prime Minister Robert Menzies decided it was time Australia again presented itself to the world. Apparently some officials favoured a kangaroo-shaped building, but the Pavilion architect James Maccormick happily thought otherwise. The architectural partnership of (Fredrick) Romberg and (Robin) Boyd were the exhibits architects, in charge of the interiors and displays. While most exhibition buildings are only ever intended to be temporary, the architecture of the Australian Pavilion was highly esteemed and considered worthy of remaining on site by the Canadian authorities. Built at the (then) enormous cost of three million dollars, the Australian Pavilion was one of the most popular with an estimated 20% of total Expo visitors attending. The chief attractions of the Pavilion were the live kangaroos and the 240 flamboyant Expo ‘67 Talking Chairs. It is thought there were 1,000 visitors per hour who were guided through the building by 21 Australian ‘hostesses’ wearing clothes designed by the Prime Minister’s wife. The display was organised into four categories: ‘The Australian Way-of-Life’; ‘The Arts’; ‘Science’ and ‘National Development’.

An idea of ‘the Australian Way-of-Life’ was given to the Canadian public through panels of photographs of Australians in characteristic activities, commentaries of the

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local culture by leading Australian newspaper cartoonists, and a display of Australia’s flora and fauna - gum trees and live kangaroos and wallabies.

‘The Arts’ were an important display within the Australian Pavilion. While at earlier expos (such as the 1937 Paris Exposition Universelle) conservative ‘impressionist’ landscape paintings of sheep, cattle and agriculture seemed to represent Australia’s reliance upon rural ‘primary industries’, the works on display at Expo ’67 were described by the Australian media as ‘modern’ and ‘challenging’. The artists chosen were Fred Williams, William Dobell, Stan Rapotec, John Olsen, James Cant and Roger Kemp. But while Australia was eager to be regarded as a ‘vital’, modern country, the art display at the Australian Pavilion also challenged the widely held international notion that Australia was culturally ‘young’. Aboriginal art was used to demonstrate the country’s age and cultural depth.

‘Science’ was demonstrated by a scale model of the giant radio-telescope at Parkes, which would subsequently transmit images of the successful American moon-landing. There was also a graphic display of ‘three notable branches of original Australian research in medical science...and six examples of pre-eminent Australian research in agricultural science.’ Australia’s industrialisation seems to have been a dominant theme of the Australian Pavilion. ‘National Development’ was represented through further displays of high technology ranging from the gimmicky to the serious. Amongst the former was the automatic shoe-shiner which accosted visitors as they entered the Pavilion while a more serious display contained a model of the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme - the world’s largest such project of its day.

Furniture design is the intellectual plaything of designers and Expos are where they strut their stuff. Three local designers produced chair designs specifically for this Expo. Scottish-born industrial designer Kjell Grant was invited to design a chair specifically for Expo ‘67. He based the seat on a single cantilever leg mimicking the spring of a kangaroo’s tail, but it was named the Montreal Chair in honour of the event.3 Fred Lowen, Chief Designer of the Fler Company, also created a chair.4 But it was the talking chairs that drew the Canadian crowds’ attention. The exhibits architect, Robin Boyd, commissioned local designers Grant and Mary Featherston to produce a chair for these conditions: a lounge chair, it had to withstand an estimated 20,000 people sitting on it and yet be light and comfortable. To meet such a tough brief, the method of construction of the Expo ‘67 Talking Chair was highly-engineered and completely new to Australian manufacturing. The shells were moulded in expanded, rigid polystyrene. This was undertaken by Danish De Luxe, a manufacturer of quality furniture based in Melbourne. The shell was then upholstered in polyurethane foam and wool by Aristoc Industries.5 Sitting in the chairs one activated tape-recordings of the voices of prominent Australians discussing aspects of Australian arts and sciences: Sir Robert Menzies on natural resources, Rolf Harris on humour, Harry Hopman on sport, Morris West on the Australian character, Googie Withers on literature, and Prime Minister Harold Holt on industrial development. The languages spoken were French and English - orange upholstery signified the former, green the latter.

3Conversation Kjell Grant, Melbourne
4'Sebel Design Award 1967.' Design Australia vol. 1, no. 1, April/May (1967). p. 47.
5Conversation Ian Howard, Melbourne.
These chairs, along with the other exhibits of technology and the fresh ‘modern’ artworks on display helped redefine Australia’s national identity away from the old emphasis on rural themes to one based on science, technology and the (modern) arts. The Australian Pavilion at Expo ’67 also attempted to tell the rest of the world that Australia had moved from being part of the British Empire and was an independent country ready to do business.