

City diplomacy: the New York World's Fair of 1939/40

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CITY DIPLOMACY: THE NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR OF 1939/40

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INTRODUCTION

This paper challenges current understandings of the role of the city in diplomacy. Traditionally scholars have employed a nation-centered approach to the study of foreign policy, but historically cities have formed an important part of national strategies as well as developing their own public diplomacy agenda. In particular, cities have used international events to promote their image as a distinct player in world's affairs. Using the New York World's Fair of 1939/40 as a case study, this paper will establish its impact on the city's rise to the international stage. It will challenge traditionalist histories of the World's Fair by arguing that its uniquely global nature remolded a Great Depression stricken New York into one of the most important sites of international diplomacy of the twentieth century. By analyzing how New York tried to influence foreign publics' perceptions of its values and identity, this paper will establish how the city developed its overall diplomatic strategy and came to acquire a distinct reputation and role from Washington DC in wider US foreign policy. The story of the World's Fair is also an opportunity to explore the impact of diplomacy on the urban and fill some of the gaps in the history of New York, whose geographic and cultural landscape was irrevocably altered by the event and its aftermath. The Fair was built on a former vast ash dump in the Corona neighborhood in Queens. The works significantly changed the topography of the area and its cultural and social landscape. It was, then, turned into a park when the exhibition closed. Present-day Flushing Meadows-Corona Park still retains much of its 1939 layout. This paper will ultimately provide an original framework to rethink the historical significance of cities in the international system.

CITY DIPLOMACY

For the first time in history, the majority of the world's population now lives in cities.¹ This growing trend has not only transformed the urban landscape but the rise of "world cities" or "global cities" as competitive and cosmopolitan economic and cultural centers has had a significant impact on the international system too.² The emerging literature has, however, thus far, focused on the role cities are playing in addressing twenty-first century global and transnational challenges, such as climate change, terrorism and pandemics. Little work has been done on the historical origins and evolution of city diplomacy.³ This is because the city has always been considered as a subnational actor. Following the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, the international community established that the state is the only entity

with the financial and material resources and legal mandate to pursue foreign policy.⁴ Yet cities are the oldest political institutions. And city diplomacy is as old as the city itself. From the Greek Polis of the fifth century BC, to the Italian city-states (Signorie) of the Medieval and Renaissance periods to nineteenth century Vienna, cities have acted as centers for social, economic and political transformation and innovation and cultural interchange.⁵ In the realm of soft power especially, through sporting and cultural events, educational institutions, such as: museums, galleries and theatres; representation activities: such as broadcasting and culinary demonstrations; as well as positive projections of the experience of working and living in the city, cities have been very successful in promoting both local and national interests.⁶

Remembered as one of the most mesmerizing cultural events of the twentieth century, the New York World's Fair of 1939/40 is an excellent historical case study to illustrate the transformative power of public diplomacy. The vast existing literature has predominantly focused on two aspects of the Fair: 1) its support for science and technology; 2) its foreign pavilions. No attention has been paid to its impact on New York city itself.

Why a Fair?

The literature on the short- and long-term benefits of hosting international sports and cultural events, such as the Olympics and World's Fairs, (or Expos, as they are commonly referred to today), is divided. A few scholars, such as Westlund and McAlvanah, have pointed out that often times costs outweigh benefits.⁷ Considerable financial investment is necessary to stage these occasions and more frequently than not, over optimistic projections turn into a revenue loss. Moreover, because of the monetary resources required, only a limited number of cities can afford to put forward a successful bid. Cities that are already in strong financial and political positions consolidate their status while the rest is further pushed to the periphery.⁸ From a soft power/diplomacy point of view, however, the long term gains offset the potential short-term losses. Hosting a Fair is a unique transformative opportunity for a city. It increases its visibility worldwide, promotes economic growth and often leads to urban development and regeneration. By cooperating with a variety of governments, international organizations, non-governmental entities, NGOs and corporations, the host city has a chance to carve its own place on the international relations scene and develop opportunities for political and economic collaborations.⁹ Through the fair's theme, it can also implement a new vision for the future by spotlighting and addressing important issues for the international community; thus, boosting its global prestige as well as its political and cultural identity.¹⁰ At local level, building and hosting a Fair create new jobs, increase international and domestic tourism and generate a lasting legacy. Infrastructures, landmarks, attractions, parks, new commercial and residential areas, all add to visitors and residents' quality of life.¹¹

THE NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR OF 1939-40

The New York World's Fair opened its doors on April 30, 1939. The date coincided with the 150th anniversary of US first president, George Washington's inauguration in New York which was then the nation's capital. It was the second most expensive US world's fair (exceeded only by St Louis in 1904) and the biggest international event since the end of World War I.¹² It took place between two of the twentieth century most catastrophic events: the Great Depression and World War II. Planning had started in 1935, when the New York's financial community led by George McAneny (banker and politician), Grover Whelan (NYC's former police commissioner), and Percy Selden Straus (president of R.H. Macy and Company) had hoped to lift the city out of the Great Depression by replicating the success of Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition of two years earlier and thus, injecting much

needed dollars in the local economy. Their optimistic projections of financial gains persuaded over 120 executives and politicians to create a Fair Corporation whose headquarter was in the newly built Empire State Building.¹³

The site chosen for the Fair was the Corona Dumps in Queens. Immortalized as a “valley of ashes” in F.S. Fitzgerald’s 1925 novel the Great Gatsby, the area was owned by the Brooklyn Ash Removal Company. It was a heavily polluted marshland and one of the worst breeding grounds for mosquitos. Yet its location, so close to the center of the city, transport links and extension, made it the ideal place to host what was supposed be the greatest show of the century.¹⁴ New York City’s civic authority enthusiastically endorsed the project which was in line with its development plans. Park commissioner Robert Moses, especially, had been dreaming of turning the land into a public park bigger than Manhattan’s Central Park since the 1920s. By his own account, he was much more interested in the aftermath of the Fair, than the event itself. “I am waiting for another less dramatic event,” he declared, “the night when the Fair closes..in another quarter of a century, old men and women will be telling their grandchildren what the Great Corona Dump looked like in the days of Fitzgerald....and how it all changed overnight.”¹⁵ He believed he could modernize and clean up New York City by building highways and public spaces. In 1931, he had led construction of the Grand Central parkway. This had made access to his first state park project: Jones Beach, in Nassau county, easier. It also kickstarted his quest to reclaim the land around the Corona Dumps. Finally, in 1935, with the support of NYC’s Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, Moses brokered an agreement with the Fair Corporation. The city would fund the reclamation work in exchange for receiving the land once the Fair was over.¹⁶

The Fair in Numbers

Work for the largest land reclamation project in the eastern US started in June 1936. In addition to the ash dumps, homes and buildings around Corona east 111th Street were condemned and included in the site. Moses gave residents a 30 days notice to move out. 450 workers on three daily shifts worked to level the ash, create a meadow and two lakes, and divert Flushing river. Infrastructure and construction of pavilions followed.¹⁷ In less than four years, the foul-smelling swamp was transformed into what *Architectural Records* described as the 8th wonder of the modern world¹⁸. It featured:

- 62 miles of roads
- 200 budlings
- exhibits by 60 nations and 33 states
- 76 concessionaries
- 310 places to eat

The Fair Corporation also made a \$1.5 million investment into landscaping. By opening day, the park boasted:

- 10,000 tress
- 2 million shrubs
- 400,000 pansies
- 500,000 hedge plants
- 1 million bulbs
- 1.5 million bedding plants

Architect William Delano, famous for having designed some of the most impressive mansions in the Northeast, designed a garden with installations of aquatic plants, sculptures and floral specimen from around the world. This became the Queens Botanical Garden when the Fair closed. It remained in

place until 1964 when works for hosting a new fair began. Many of the trees that had been planted for the 1939 Fair were transplanted in current garden location.¹⁹

The money to finance this record-breaking project came from different sources. The city of New York invested \$26.7 million to carry out the reclamation works and build its permanent pavilion. New York state contributed \$6.2 million, and the federal government donated \$3 million. Thanks to the Fair's president, Grover Whelan's impressive diplomatic skills, foreign governments contributed over \$30 million. This was mostly spent to build their pavilions. The final \$27 million came through redeemable bonds, repayable in 1941 at 4% interest. It was agreed among all parties that any profit from the fair would be invested in turning the grounds into a public park to be named Flushing-Meadow Corona Park.²⁰

Building the World of Tomorrow

Whereas previous exhibitions had looked at the past to celebrate national achievements, the New York World's Fair of 1939 presented a new utopistic vision of the future where technology and science could make a positive contribution to a safer and more peaceful world. Many Americans blamed technological progress for the job loss of the Great Depression and had lost faith in big business and capitalism. Through the displays, the Fair's organizers wanted to show the public that technology was not the problem, but the solution. In this sense, as historian Robert Rydell, has argued, their aim was not dissimilar from all 1930s Fairs, "to restore popular faith in the vitality of the nation's economic and political system."²¹ But New York did not just want to restore faith, it also wanted to introduce a new blueprint for the future where the American way of life was everybody's choice of life because of its ideals and values, and belief in progress, liberty and democracy. Underpinning this would be the strength of American capitalism. In short, an earlier version of what media tycoon, Henry Luce later called the "American century."²²

New York would be the embodiment of this vision. This would also help in rethinking the role of the city on both the national and international scene. In the 1930s, the American people's perception of New York was far from positive. It was seen as "a highhanded, overpriced and short-stuffed metropolis."²³ The Fair's president, Grover Whelan, made revamping the city's image one of his top priorities. The goal was, he declared, to "portray New York in a true light; to show the world that this is not a cold and indifferent city, but has a warm heart and sympathetic hand."²⁴ This would not only attract numerous visitors and much needed business, but it would also give New York the opportunity to act as the capital of peace. In light of the escalating tensions in Europe, Whelan hoped that the Fair could become the seat of an international peace conference too where the world powers would develop a peace program. He worked closely with the US State Department to recruit as many foreign countries as possible.²⁵ Indeed, the Fair's official guide book described the exhibition as a forerunner of the United Nations and an improved version of the League Nations; "the presence of 60 foreign participants proves the Fair a true parliament of the world."²⁶

The Future is Urban: Democracy and Futurama

Peace and democracy were reflected in the Fair's architecture too. In the words of New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, "the heart of the Fair" was at the intersection of Constitution Mall and Rainbow Avenue where the Four Freedoms statues stood.²⁷ Created by Leo Friedlander, they represented the four basic human rights, as guaranteed by the American Constitution: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Press, and Freedom of Assembly. The theme would be later picked up by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his Four Freedoms speech in January 1941 to outline the U.S. role in helping allies already engaged in WWII.²⁸

From the statues' location, visitors would get a bird's eye view of the Fair's site. This was organized around seven themed zones: Transportation, Communication, Business/Consumer, International Foods, Amusement, and International Government where all foreign pavilions were built. The Theme Center acted like a hub and linked all the zones. At its center were the Trylon and the Perisphere. Designed by Wallace K. Harrison and Jacques-Andre Fouilhoux, these two futurist structures were taller than any other buildings on the Fair's site and could be seen from the Bronx and Manhattan.²⁹ Inside the Perisphere, from two rotating balconies, called "the Magic Carpet", fairgoers could watch one of the most popular attractions of the Fair: Democracy. This was a 6 minutes video that recreated the Fair's organizers' view of the ideal city of the future. A green, crime-free place where quality of life was guaranteed by integrating the best the urban, rural, industrial and business world had to offer and where men and women from all socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds could live together in peace.³⁰

The most popular exhibition at the Fair was Futurama hosted by General Motors. It perfectly captured the Fair's message that technology could deliver a better future and that this future was urban. Created by Del Geddes, it portrayed an optimistic vision of life in 1960. A moving sound-chair took visitors through a large-scale model that depicted a clean, open city surrounded by green spaces and connected by automated highways for semi-automated vehicles.³¹ *Business Week* described the exhibition as: "a tourist's paradise.. which unfolds a prophecy of cities, towns, and countrysides served by a comprehensive road system."³²

These two utopistic visions, Democracy and Futurama, greatly contrasted with the chaos in Europe and sent a message to the international community that the world of tomorrow was America and the city of tomorrow was New York.

CONCLUSION: The Fair's Legacy

The first season of the fair closed on October 31, 1930. A second season took place the following year between May and October, with a slightly modified theme that focused more on peace due to the outbreak of WWII in Europe.³³ Gallup poll reported that over 85% of fairgoers enjoyed the show.³⁴ Over 160 US and international magazines, 731 radio programs and 12 million column inches in newspapers reported enthusiastically about the Fair.³⁵ Yet despite the positive publicity, the Fair failed to turn a profit. Only 25 million visitors of the expected 50 million turned up. Nonetheless, despite the financial losses, the Fair was undoubtedly an early successful example of city branding. From a soft power point of view, New York benefitted immensely from hosting the event and repaired its Great Depression-tarnished reputation. Its image went from dirty and corrupted capital of crime to world capital of prosperity and peace. The Fair positioned it to become the permanent seat of the United Nations. A place in Connecticut had originally been chosen for the new world organization, but as Whelan put it, New York had become "the center of information."³⁶ It made perfect sense for world leaders to gather in this cosmopolitan hub to protect and preserve democracy. Indeed, the New York city building served as its temporary home from 1946 to 1950. The city did not incur financial losses because when the Fair corporation declared bankruptcy, New York enforced its contractual rights to claim income from admission, rents and concessions.³⁷ Overall, economic benefits and stimulus were estimated to be \$1 billion from hosting the Fair. Moreover, diplomacy had an incredibly positive impact on the urban. The city benefitted from numerous infrastructure projects. There were major improvements to transport. Flushing Meadow Corona Park was built from nothing. It is now the fourth largest public park in New York City with a total area of almost 900 acres. It has become an important support for the local economy. It retains much of the layout from the 1939 World's Fair. Its attractions include the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, the current venue for the US

Open tennis tournament; Citi Field, the home of the New York Mets baseball team; the New York Hall of Science; the Queens Museum of Art; the Queens Theatre in the Park; the Queens Zoo; the Unisphere; and the New York State Pavilion. These attract millions of local, national and international visitors every year and have improved the living experience in the borough of Queens.³⁸ As the *New York Times* wrote on Fair's seventieth anniversary, it remains: "an extraordinary extravaganza of architecture and entertainment that no subsequent exposition in this country would be able to equal."³⁹

NOTES

¹ “2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects,” United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, accessed July 23, 2021, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>

² Simon Curtis and Michele Acuto, “The Foreign Policy of Cities,” *RUSI Journal*, 163, (2018), xx; Rogier Ven der Pluijijum with Jan Melissen, *City Diplomacy: The Expanding Role of Cities in International Politics* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, April 2007).

³ Very little work has been done on the historical roots of city diplomacy. This mostly goes back to the 1970s and explore the role that cities have played at the start of globalization. In recent months, new research has begun to appear on earlier periods of history. Several case studies have been published in a special issue of the journal *Diplomatica*. For example: Tessa De Boer, “Early Modern Amsterdam’s Dealings in City Diplomacy” *Diplomatica*, 3 (2021), 167-179; Halvard Leira and Benjamin de Carvahlo, “The Intercity Origins of Diplomacy: Consuls, Empires and the Sea,” *Diplomatica*, 3 (2021), 147-156.

⁴ Lorenzo Kihlgren Grandi, *City Diplomacy* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 39.

⁵ Michele Acuto, Anna Kosovac and Kris Hartley “City Diplomacy: another generational shift?” *Diplomatica*, 3 (2021), 137-146; Efe Sevin, “Bright Future for City Diplomacy and Soft Power” *Diplomatica*, 3 (2021), 200-209.

⁶ Jo Beall and David Adam, “Cities: Prosperity and Influence, the role of city diplomacy in shaping soft power in the 21st century,” accessed May 11, 2021, www.britishcouncil.org; Jay Wang and Sohaela Amiri, “Building a Robust Capacity Framework for US City Diplomacy,” accessed May 11, 2021, www.USCPublicDiplomacy.org; John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold, *Cities of Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 10-11.

⁷ Micheal Westlund and Edward McAlvanah, “Are World Expos worth Hosting?” *Naval Academy Scientific Bulletin*, 1 (2007), 472-477, accessed December 7, 2020, https://www.anmb.ro/buletinstiintific/buletine/2017_Issue1/FCS/472-477.pdf; Gold and Gold, *Cities of Culture*, 1-44.

⁸ Westlund and McAlvanah, 472; Gold and Gold, 22.

⁹ Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America* (Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institution, 2000), 5-13; Vicente Gonzalez Loscertales, “Advancing Public Diplomacy Through World Expos” accessed December 7, 2020, http://www.expo-museum.org/en_US/info/bieAndExpos/details/000000004c9b77ee014c9d86b0fd0029.shtml

¹⁰ Ibid.; Jian Wang, “Nation Branding and World Expos”, accessed October 27, 2020, <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/component/easyblog/entry/nation-branding-and-world-expos?Itemid=1009>; Gold and Gold, *Cities of Culture*, 1-44.

¹¹ Yawei Chen, “Not Just Better Cities, Better Life,” accessed November 5, 2020, <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/component/easyblog/entry/not-just-better-city-better-life?Itemid=1009>

¹² Bill Cotter, *The 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 9.

¹³ James, Mauro, *Twilight at the World of Tomorrow* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2010), 15.

¹⁴ Ted, Steinberg, *Gotham Unbound: Planning the Ecological History of Greater New York* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 211.

¹⁵ Quoted in Munro, 18

¹⁶ Robert Caro, *The Power Broker and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 362-367.

¹⁷ Cotter, *The 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair*, 9-14.

¹⁸ “Design Trends,” *Architectural Records*, November 1938, accessed June 23, 2021 <https://www.worldsfairphotos.com/nywf39/articles/design-trends.pdf>

¹⁹ Cotter, *The 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair*, 9-14.

²⁰ Gold and Gold, *Cities of Culture*, 94

²¹ Robert, Rydell, *World of Fairs. The Century of Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 213.

²² Henry, Luce, "The American Century," *Life* magazine, February 17, 1941, https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=l0kEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA64&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

²³ Quoted in Munro, *Twilight at the World of Tomorrow*, 93.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Minutes from meeting of Advisory Committee of War Veterans, April 2, 1937, NYPL, Box 258.

²⁶ Robert, Kohn, "World's Fair for Peace and Freedom," NYPL, Box 1051; *Official Guide Book to the New York World's Fair*, 3rd edn, SML Box 470, 124-5.

²⁷ John D. Inazu, *Liberty's Refuge: The Forgotten Freedom of Assembly* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 75.

²⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "State of the Union," January 6, 1941, accessed June 20, 2020, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/four-freedoms>

²⁹ Cotter, *The 1930-40 New York World's Fair*, 15-24

³⁰ Democracy booklet, 1-24 accessed May 13, 2021

https://www.1939nyworldsfair.com/worlds_fair/wf_tour/theme-7.aspx

³¹ Futurama Booklet, 1-24 accessed May 13, 2020,

[https://www.1939nyworldsfair.com/worlds_fair/wf_tour/zone-](https://www.1939nyworldsfair.com/worlds_fair/wf_tour/zone-6/futurama_booklet/futurama_booklet.aspx)

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³² Peter Fotsch, "The Building of a Superhighway Future at the New York World's Fair," *Cultural Critique*, 48 (2001), 65-97.

³³ Alan Taylor, "The 1939 New York World's Fair", *The Atlantic*, November 1, 2013 accessed June, 2, 2021 <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/11/the-1939-new-york-worlds-fair/100620/>

³⁴ Gallup poll quoted in *the New York Times*, August 20, 1939, p 34, accessed June 13, 2021 https://www.nytimes.com/search/?date_select=full&query=+August+20%252C+1939%252C+p+34&type=nyt&x=0&y=0

³⁵ D.H. Gelenter, *1939: The Lost World of the Fair* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 349.

³⁶ Philip, Quarles, "Mr New York: Grover Whelan's Unique Diplomacy" WNYC Radio, accessed July 18, 2021 <https://www.wnyc.org/story/216001-grover-whalen/>

³⁷ Gold and Gold, *Cities of Culture*, 102.

³⁸ Flushing Meadow Corona Park, accessed July 13, 2021 https://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/vt_flushing_meadows/presentation/04conceptualframework_2.pdf

³⁹ Paul Godlberger, *the New York Times*, June 20, 1980, accessed July 18, 2021 https://www.nytimes.com/search/?date_select=full&query=the+New+York+Times%252C+June+20%252C+1980&type=nyt&x=0&y=0

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