Expo Milano: Capitalist Dreams and Eating Machines

Abstract: Expo Milano, the 2015 World Fair, promised visitors an experience that would change how we imagine feeding the planet in the generations to come. Dozens of nations constructed monumental pavilions and spectacles, creating a Disneyland-like environment of cleverly concealed technologies and mass entertainment. For the 20 million people who came to play at social justice or sample bites of sustainability, what did Expo Milano really offer? What questions were asked, what experiences created, and what did visitors leave with at the end of the day? This article critiques the event for its profit-based design and logics, depicting a theme park simulacrum that gave visitors a high tech but empty-handed role in thinking or doing foodways differently. In addition to examining Expo Milano’s shortcomings, I also point to the kinds of innovations and interactions that might allow us to imagine a more dynamic—and challenging—future of food.

Keywords: Expo Milano, World Fair, play, innovation, corporate logics, technology, sustainability, labor, agriculture

Visitors arriving to Expo Milano on a Monday morning last September spewed out of the metro station, dumbfounded for a moment by the bright sunlight and the teeming mass of Italian schoolchildren, European tourists, and international journalists waiting eagerly in messy queues. By 9:00 a.m., the line to get inside had backed up to the station exit. Social justice and technological innovation in their tastiest form—food—had been transformed into a theme park, and the world had arrived to see it.

The towering pavilions and ubiquitous advertisements promised new possibilities and far-off places. Banners over the entrances read “Welcome #Earthdefenderz!”, claiming camaraderie with the nameless images of African herders and South Asian farmers plastered above. The participating nations and corporations pledged to push the boundaries of how we might make enough food, keep making enough food, and distribute food more efficiently and justly. “At Expo Milano,” my pamphlet read, “you’ll eat the amazing food, learn about and discuss the nutrition challenges that face our planet, experience innovations firsthand, and discover a better future.”

Pavilion Zero began in darkness, with a single giant (plastic) tree breaking through the ceiling into the day. We moved through backlit panels of seeds, passed beneath canopies of farm instruments and dangling fishing gear, and stepped around animals that stood motionless and ghostly white. We peered at miniature landscapes that tracked the evolution of agriculture and industry and passed through an entire room filled with a mountain of food waste (also plastic). Wall Street...
ticker tape flashed prices for peanuts and pomegranates, and portraits of smallholders in the Global South lauded the “Best Practices” that these farmers employ. Then, having strolled through thousands of years of human agricultural history, we stepped out into the daylight and stared, blinking, at the mile of humanity before us.

Upon reaching the main avenue of the exposition, the crowd eagerly formed new lines to enter the massive pavilions and towers that announced their presence with sandstone castles, hundred-foot mirrors, artificial waterfalls, or a suspended web of cables the size of a soccer field that bounced and swayed as visitors clambered across it. Pop song refrains and drum lines thumped out across the main walkway, but whatever was inside remained hidden behind red ropes and sliding doors. The aromas of doughnuts, gyros, coffee, waffles, and sausage brought to mind a state fair with an international food court.

It was a bit like arriving to Disneyland. “The Happiest Place on Earth” was inspired by the Chicago World Fair of 1893 (Larson 2003), and when Disneyland first opened in Southern California, it promised to be “a museum of living facts, and a show place of beauty and magic. It will be filled with the accomplishments, the joys, the hopes of the world we live in. And it will remind us and show us how to make those wonders part of our lives” (Sorkin 1992: 6). Like Walt Disney in 1955, the politicians and corporations behind Expo Milano created a wonderland of commercial spectacle. The sensory overload of Expo in all its theme park glory—glaringly eclectic architecture, spinning lights and pumping music, a cornucopia of sugar, salt, and grease—was an admirable monument to the latest in entertainment technologies. In doing so, however, Expo’s designers transformed what was ostensibly a crowdsourced think tank on feeding the world into a simulacrum of global foodways, miniaturized and cleansed of its less savory elements. The animals were plastic, the garbage did not stink, the workers remained frozen in smiling photos, and the carefully curated plants were not to be touched or picked.

Expo was a space to play at social justice, to sample bites of sustainability. Visitors were encouraged to imagine (space farming) or to participate (through smartphone postings and pictures), but first and foremost, they were there to play. Whether climbing on the rope jungle of Brazil’s pavilion or reaching out to touch the Japanese rice paddies made of light, Expo played on the crowd’s wonder, delight, and appetites. Rain fell on models of Swiss mountains and French fish swam through bunches of wheat and lavender, with pots and pans waving through the air. Malaysia created an indoor rainforest and Italy animated life-sized frescos that melted Roman heritage into modern practices.

When I asked people exiting the pavilions, “Is it worth the wait?” they usually responded enthusiastically. “Oh yes,” I was told, “there is a room that turns into the ocean, then the forest, then the mountains—it’s fantastic!” Visitors described vivid 3D animation or interactive features that connected to
their phones. They did not tell me what they learned about an equatorial ecosystem or what they thought about the tuna fishing industry. As a spectacle of “progress” or “innovation” in food, Expo inspired awe in thinking about how many different worlds contribute to feeding the planet, it asked visitors to consider the sheer scale and diversity of global production, but it did not ask anyone to think hard.

Some of the ideas imparted at Expo were carefully crafted by its designers; others were unavoidably created by the overall experience. I arrived knowing that Ferrero, McDonald’s, and even Walgreens were behind all of the shimmering facades and dancing lights. But being there, surrounded by Customize Your Coca-Cola Can booths and New Holland Agriculture tractors, the central role of corporations in feeding the world became impossible to ignore. As my Italian colleague put it, what with Slow Food offering a glass of wine,
two crackers, and a piece of cheese for ten euros and McDonald’s providing lunch for less than three euros, it was quite clear who was feeding this world. McDonald’s took advantage of its proximity to the Slow Food gardens and lectures to throw heat across the walkway, tweeting that it was “satisfied and proud at Expo to serve 6,000 meals each day of quality and at accessible prices, with ingredients that come from Italian farmers. Thousands of people choose us freely, perhaps after visiting the immense, sad, and lonely Slow Food pavilion.” Slow Food shot back, asking what kind of farming practices could possibly produce a burger at that price, but its low-tech pavilion remained conspicuously empty.

By 10:00 a.m., the line to visit the Italian pavilion, with a nest of crisscrossed white beams stretching above the peaks and domes of other pavilions, had grown to at least two thousand people. Japan—ever the organized—posted estimated wait times of three hours, and volunteers patrolled the snaking lines of people to make sure no one went sneaking in through the gift shop. Restrooms, restaurants, and even drinking fountains were no different. You wanted something? You were going to have to wait. For an event titled “Feeding the Planet,” it was certainly a good model of what limited resources, hierarchies of access, and the corporatization of everything might look like.

While robotics and digital displays showcased the technologies of tomorrow, there was little at Expo that suggested we might eat different dishes than we do today. Perhaps order or procure them differently, but our current tastes and habits remained unchallenged by the event. The one truly novel item at the Future Food Supermarket was a for display only bag of Crunchy Crickets. The rest of the products were completely familiar, among them items that one would hope will not be a part of future markets: plastic-wrapped conventional strawberries and prepackaged sandwiches with impending expiration dates. The supermarket of the future was no more than a glorified gift shop, hawking mundane packages of cookies, employing touch-screen label information, and featuring fruit weighed by humanoid robots.

Meals at Expo were served on paper and plastic, and for the six month duration of the Fair, the small white paper cups emblazoned with the Expo logo were ubiquitous in Italian coffee bars, outdoor festivals, and in the hands of people begging for change on street corners. While the event organizers did make a valiant effort of repurposing food waste—2,000 kilograms of leftover food were collected and redistributed to conceptual restaurants and soup kitchens in Milan in the month of May alone—the innumerable tons of paper, plastic, metal, and glass that Expo consumed and spat out were not so easily digested. Some pavilions did use biodegradable materials, but by no means all, and the innovative eating utensils made of bamboo, palm leaves, or sugar cane available from dozens of suppliers today were nowhere to be found.

Meanwhile, the national pavilions followed a common set of themes: “Our Unique Heritage and Our Vibrant Traditions” or “Our Rich Resources and Untapped Potential for Future Development.” The displays at Expo catered to the preexisting desires of tourists and investors. How we will feed the planet was gestured at—Holland vaguely described research toward cultivating tomatoes on Mars, while the
United States featured a new drought-resistant strain of sorghum to cultivate in African nations—but it was largely a symbolic effort rather than a serious engagement. Each pavilion had its own motto—We Are What We Eat; Harmony in Diversity; Feeding the World with Solutions—that relied on familiar language to advertise exotic resources or attractions.

Perhaps the most aggressively conceptual pavilion, Switzerland’s towers stood apart from their neighbors. The four columns filled with single servings of water, apples, coffee, and salt encouraged visitors to take what they wanted, but also to consider how quickly the towers would empty if everyone took with abandon. “Is there enough for everyone?” the pavilion asked, posing the question that has resurfaced few generations since Malthus formulated it in 1789. But the packets of dried fruit or salt were tokens (many probably ended up in the trash) whose presence or absence had little to do with what visitors ate for lunch that day. If Expo were to take playing at feeding the planet seriously, would the food vendors run out of supplies each day? Would visitors be asked to consume repurposed food scraps or only sustainably produced meals? Would participants understand themselves as movers and shakers or simply as eating machines?

Turning food and farming into play at Expo was predicated on a gaping absence: labor. If long-distance supply chains and corporate partnerships are to be how we feed the world, Expo was conspicuously vague in depicting who will do the planting, weeding, spraying, picking, tending, slaughtering, and processing. In the Italian wine pavilion, disembodied hands snatched at bunches of grapes on the vine. In ‘Turkey’s’ display, white plastic hands cupped piles of seeds. Missing from the light shows and holograms were the countless people whose lives are rooted in agriculture or who are uprooted across borders to labor precariously in food production. A few photogenic farmers posed happily next to massive combines in the United States or looked up from their harvest work in Gambia, but their demands, observations, and concerns were absent from the displays. Like Disneyland or Epcot, Expo portrayed global foodways and served food in such a way that “conceal[s] any trace of origins, of the labour processes that produced them, or of the social relations implicated in their production” (Harvey 1989: 299, 300).

The work of growing, raising, or processing food is not so far removed from the lives of the crisply dressed and smartphone savvy Milanese. Italy is a nation only a generation or two removed from agricultural worlds, a place where grandparents remember eating seasonally, locally, or less because those were the only options available. These forms of knowledge and sustainable practices are not technologically exciting, but they do offer a valuable set of resources for imagining the future. The land purchased for the construction of Expo could easily have been turned into a working farm instead of a concrete kingdom. Designers might have dispensed with the wagons full of plastic fruits and fish that lined the central walkway and created a chance for visitors to plant a seed, feed a goat, compost scraps, or at least see how it is done as part of the Expo experience. In the original designs for Expo, some semblance of farming was part of the plans, but this idea was eventually crossed out and converted to pavilion construction that was more appetizing to sponsors (Latronico 2015).

For all the technological fixes or innovations that have transformed food and agriculture, we are still dependent on a few inches of topsoil and a certain set of climactic conditions to survive. Most of what we eat does not grow itself—rather, it is produced by underpaid and often ruthlessly exploited workers—and engaging with that reality, if only for a few minutes before washing your hands, opens up a different set of questions about what new technologies can or should change the way we feed the planet.

I left Expo exhausted and saturated with sensory input, taking with me a worrisome vision of the future as a dystopic Disneyland of both excess and overpopulation. By creating a theme park out of a United Nations goal, Expo illustrated some of the fundamental flaws in common approaches to global nutrition and agriculture, not to mention social justice writ large: short-term visions, profit-driven methods, and continual growth (or “development”) as the answer to all problems. Unlike World Fairs of the past that showcased the inventions that would “change the world”—the telephone, the x-ray, the touch screen—Expo primarily advertised established companies, destinations, or dishes. The entertainment itself was the main innovation, but how it all worked was ingeniously concealed behind
hastily constructed walls and floors. With fun and investment as the primary goals of the event, the possibilities of imagining a future that is different—in its ideals, logics, and practices—from the status quo were drowned out by towering screens and trampled by eager crowds.

Each night, Expo’s “Tree of Life” lit up with fireworks, spinning lights, and soaring fountains à la Las Vegas. Small children draped over parents’ shoulders clutched the bamboo hats purchased at Vietnam’s pavilion as volunteers began collecting the food waste generated by hosting 150,000 visitors daily. People left with sunburns and the delirious relief that comes with surviving a day at a theme park and finally heading home. Did they depart with expanded perspectives on how to feed the world? Do they understand themselves as part of a problem or a solution? Will they make different choices as voters, shoppers, eaters, farmers, or cooks?

Expo’s legacy, like that of most spectacles, is one of empty buildings and fading glitter. Expo shut its doors in November 2015. Some of the more mobile displays have been relocated to Italian museums, but what will be done with the infrastructure and buildings remains to be seen. At the time of writing, proposals included a research center, a sports facility, or a convention site, but if the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup are any indicators, they will go largely unused and fall into disrepair.

In all the fun and games at Expo Milano, the familiar logos of Big Food seemed perfectly at home in the future of food, and left up to the corporations currently feeding the world, there is little impetus to deviate from our current tastes or habits. I harbor no illusions about the importance of large-scale production facilities in supplying the global population; in all likelihood, these corporations will be the actors that shape and profit from “Feeding the Planet” for decades to come. The corporations present at Expo have the research and development capacities to transform the way we produce, distribute, and consume food. It is time that we stopped being content with shiny packaging or tasty treats, and demand a different set of practices and perspectives from them.

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REFERENCES