Lisa D. Schrenk

_Building a Century of Progress: The Architecture of Chicago’s 1933–34 World’s Fair_  
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 368 pp., 26 color and 172 b/w illus. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 9780816648368

Cheryl R. Ganz

_The 1933 Chicago World’s Fair: A Century of Progress_  
Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008, 272 pp., 42 color and 45 b/w illus. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 9780252033575

When you virtually browse the bookshelves of Amazon.com you will find pages of books about the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, made even more famous in the popular imagination by Erik Larson’s best selling _The Devil in the White City_ (2004). There is even a computer game on that world’s fair called _1893: A World’s Fair Mystery_, about a diamond heist conducted at the exposition. Now, try to search the 1933–34 Century of Progress fair, either on that website or on any number of antiquarian book sites. You will find some archival publications dating from the time of the fair, but you will be hard pressed to find anything more recent, such as a historical survey—that is, until now. Historians are fortunate that there have been two recent books on that Chicago world’s fair, both being very welcome additions to the field. They both belong in the library of anyone who professes an interest in modernism, especially eclectic, conservative American modernism of the interwar years. And both books, in their own ways, tell an amazing story about a major world’s fair that was the first to post a profit, created more than 20,000 jobs during a global economic depression, and welcomed over nine million visitors.

The first of these books, published in 2007, is the very thorough architectural survey by Lisa D. Schrenk, _Building a Century of Progress_. Using archives from various sources, including the major 1933 world’s fair archive at the University of Illinois in Chicago, her book is an exhaustive chronicle of the creation of the fair’s built environment. Schrenk’s story ranges from the fair’s inception in 1923 as a centennial to celebrate Chicago’s founding, to the shift in 1929 to the Century of Progress theme—which would demonstrate the scientific advances made over the past 100 years and hint at the many to come—to the looting and destruction at the fair’s closing night on 31 October 1934, and the subsequent demolition or disassembly and re-creation of the remaining pavilions. Schrenk examines the leadership of Major Lenox Lohr as general manager in creating and shaping the fair, his role in transforming it from a civic-booster centennial to a celebration of science and technology. She surveys successful efforts to create a profitable exposition and to create a dynamic series of exhibits that would educate and entertain all age levels. Schrenk’s book is rich with images and information that show the development of the fairgrounds and structures. She discusses the skyscraper theme of some buildings that were not realized in relation to the popular Skyride, which offered an airplane-like ride over the fairgrounds and provided a strong vertical element. She considers the influence on this fair—in terms of modern forms, electric lighting, and new materials—of other recent expositions, such as the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, the Weissenhof Siedlung held in Stuttgart in 1927, and, most interestingly, the 1931 Paris Exposition Coloniale. Beyond documenting the architecture of the various pavilions, corporate marketing “ducks,” and the homes of tomorrow that were constructed at the Chicago fair, Schrenk includes chapters on innovative building materials (such as Celotex and Masonite), prefabrication (which lowered construction costs), and the impact that this fair had on the 1939 New York world’s fair and on postwar design, especially in the realm of cable-suspended and thin-shell concrete roofs. She also documents the reuse and reconstruction of fair pavilions, particularly the Homes of Tomorrow and the Ford pavilion, and discusses Frank Lloyd Wright’s unrealized designs for the fair and his predictably dismissive comments about it.

In all, there is more than enough meat here to keep any architectural historian occupied. This book does an excellent job of documenting this long-overlooked world’s fair. If I have any quibble, it is that I would have liked at times to see some greater historical contextualization. For instance, something on the Adler Planetarium and how fair architecture and functions were intended to complement and not compete with the planetarium’s programming and exhibits, or of how the “official” fair structures related to the theme-park midway of corporate pavilions and pleasure palaces, would have helped link the fair constructions to broader social and cultural themes of the era.

To understand fully the fair’s architecture and planning within a greater context it is thus essential to read Cheryl R. Ganz’s _The 1933 Chicago World’s Fair_ alongside Schrenk’s book. Ganz begins her book with the story of fan-dancer Sally Rand—a sex-symbol celebrity of the era, and perhaps the single most memorable personality or
feature of the fair. Rand, born Helen Harriet Beck, was an up-and-coming film starlet of the 1920s who was catapulted to national fame by her fan dances and suggestive costumes. During the course of the fair she was arrested for riding a horse, Lady Godiva–style (dressed in only a flesh-colored bodysuit), across the grounds. Although Ganz does not recount the apocryphal but oft-cited story of Rand’s fan-dance audition for her world’s fair job before architect Andrew Rebori and his colleagues atop the windy LaSalle-Wacker Building (1929–30), her discussion of Rand’s activities sets the stage for the wealth of information the book includes about personalities at the fair beyond its architects. These range from former military men, such as Major Lenox Lohr, whose war-tested talents in organization—based on efficiency expert Frederick Taylor’s principles—made the fair a reality, to the successful fundraisers and lobbyists Charles and Rufus Dawes.

In addition to her chapters on the preparation and implementation of the exposition, Ganz includes important discussions of how gender and ethnicity were represented at the fair. The 1893 women’s building at the World’s Columbian Exposition is compared to the similar but ultimately unsuccessful efforts at the 1933 fair. Ganz recounts the struggles and scandals among a variety of special interest groups—male managers, female professionals, and society or club-women—over a proposed Temple of Womanhood, designed by Daniel H. Burnham, Jr., which was based on the concepts of Dorthea Goodrich. Likewise, her chapter on ethnicity discusses the image and role of Mexicans and African Americans at the fair. For architectural historians, there is a particularly revealing discussion about the initial absence of black architects from the fair, the eventual reconstruction of DuSable’s cabin by the African-American architect Charles S. Duke, and the racial unrest generated by the fact that Chicago’s founder Jean Baptiste-Pointe DuSable was a Haitian-born black.

The last chapter in Ganz’s book deals with nationalism and aviation, and this is particularly interesting to me—a historian of aviation architecture and design—because she not only acknowledges well-known aerospace events, such as the Italian aviator Italo Balbo’s promotional flight to the fair and the 1933 attempts at record-setting high-altitude balloon flight, but she explores in greater depth the ambivalence to Nazi Germany and the fair flyby of the airship Graf Zeppelin, on 26 October 1933. In a sense, that enormous airship was a floating pavilion to showcase Germany’s technological prowess to fairgoers. Ganz provides in-depth examinations of the controversy behind the issuance of a Zeppelin stamp to help fund the historic flight, the protests and boycott by Chicago’s Jewish community and labor groups, the ambivalence of the German-American community about this visit, the extra security necessitated by the flight to counter bomb threats, and the differing speeches and predictable audience reception to the apolitical Zeppelin commander Hugo Eckener and the pro-Nazi German Ambassador Hans Luther.

In all, Ganz’s book is rich with history and historic tales, supplying a sociocultural context for Schrenk’s thorough architectural history. Each is a great complement to the other. For instance, while Schrenck examines the various fair color schemes from 1933 to 1934, developed by Joseph Urban and Shepard Vogelgesang of his office, Ganz discusses how the use of sprayed rather than rolled or brushed paint lowered costs by eliminating the need for union painters. Schrenk has a good examination of the fair’s lighting, designed by D’Arcy Ryan of General Electric, which dynamically animated the buildings and grounds; Ganz augments this by discussing the use of gaseous tube lighting and the fair’s role in popularizing the use of neon and helium and mercury-vapor floodlights. Where Schrenk talks about the recycling of some pavilions, such as the Bendix Lama Temple for the 1939 World’s Fair in New York, Ganz examines the reuse of DuSable’s recreated cabin for the 1940 American Negro Exposition.

Both books point to one of the most ironic facts about the Century of Progress: that today, the only architectural on-site survivor of this American modern expo is the classical Roman column that Mussolini donated to commemorate Balbo’s historic flight. It now stands just outside Soldier Field, transplanted from its original location at the entrance to Italy’s fair pavilion.

What is missing from both of these books? It is difficult to say, since each has given, in its own way, the first real study of this fair from an architectural and historical perspective. Perhaps both could have done more to link the fair with people, events, and eclectically modern buildings at other fairs of the 1930s (beyond the New York fair of 1939)—particularly the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas of 1936 and the 1939 Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco. Also worth analyzing would be the relationship in these world’s fairs between their midway entertainment zones and the development of modern amusement and theme parks. I am certain, however, that there are enough starting points within both books for historians to develop their own articles and books. Meanwhile, we should thank both Schrenk and Ganz for providing us with important works that finally provide scholarly viewpoints on the Century of Progress Exposition.

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