A Theory of Expositions, Umberto Eco

A Theory of Expositions

What does Expo ’67—that unsurpassed, quintessential, classic

World’s Fair—mean in today’s world? There are many possible answers, depending on the point of view from which we look at the phenomenon. We could give an interpretation in terms of cultural history, in sociological terms, in architectural terms, or from the point of view of visual, oral, or written communication. Since an exposition presents itself as a phenomenon of many faces, full of contradictions, open to various uses, we are probably entitled to interpret it from all these points of view.

Perhaps in the end we shall discover that though the interpretations are different, they are complementary and not contradictory. Expositions as Inventories Spires, geodesic domes, molecular structures enlarged millions of times, cathedrals, shacks, monorails, space frames, astronauts’ suits and helmets, moon rocks, rare minerals, the King of Bohemia’s crown, Etruscan vases, Pompeiian corpses, a Magdeburg sphere, incense burners from Thailand, Persian rugs, Giuseppe Verdi’s cravat, cars, TV sets, tractors, jewelry, transistors, wooden statues from the Renaissance, panoramic views of fairytale landscapes, electronic computers, boomerangs, an Ethiopian lion, an Australian kangaroo, Donatello’s David, a photo of Marilyn Monroe, a mirror-labyrinth, a few hundred prefabricated dwellings, a plastic human brain, three parachutes, ten carousels

At first contact and first reaction, exhibitions assume the form of an inventory, an enormous gathering of evidence from Stone to Space Age, an accumulation of objects useless and precious, an immense catalogue of things produced by man in all countries over the past ten thousand years, displayed so that humanity will not forget them. They seem to be a final recapitulation in the face of a hypothetical end of the world. Considering this aspect, we realize that the exhibition technique antedated the nineteenth century, when expositions were actually born, by several centuries. We can cite famous collections of objects gathered in past eras, when uncertainty about the future and fear of the apocalypse were dominant, when church and state attempted to summarize all the memorabilia of the past in a collection, in a fantastic accumulation of strange and marvelous objects, to save them from oblivion and the avalanche of history.

“We felt the need to transmit the description of the ornaments of the church with which God’s hand, during our administration, has embellished his house, his beloved wife, fearing that Oblivion, jealous rival of Truth, will steal in and erase for the future this worthy example. . . .” In this way Suger, abbot of St. Denis in the twelfth century, began his description of liturgical objects, of ampulae, holy crosses, gems of a goblet “made of 140 ounces of gold, decorated with precious stones, amethysts, and topazes,” and also of “a porphyry vase that was fashioned into a wondrous thing by the hand of a sculptor; after it had been in storage unused for many years, he transformed it from an amphora into the shape of an eagle.”

That was the period when cathedrals and princely courts assembled great collections of treasures, like that of the Archduke of Bavaria who owned 3,407 objects, including “an egg that an abbot had found inside another egg, some manna divinely supplied during a famine, a stuffed elephant, a

hydra, and a basilisk," or the treasure of the Due de Berry, which included a unicorn's horn; or the Wunderkammern of the sixteenth century, collections of diverse and wondrous objects, unconsciously anticipating the taste for the assemblage, for the "bricolage" of the pop artist who juxtaposes things out of context. (These collections also had a prestige function, to celebrate a dynasty or a town as a commercial, cultural, or religious center.) Only one thing made these classic collections different from modern expositions: the fact that they concerned the past and contained nothing which pointed to the future. It was only with the expositions of the nineteenth century that the marvels of the year 2000 began to be announced. And it is only with Disneyland and Disney World that concern with the Space Age is combined with nostalgia for a fairytale past.

But is an exposition today anything more than an adult Disneyland? Having been reminded that the zest for collection and assemblage is ancient and that it also represented apocalyptic insecurity and hope for the future, we realize that cultural history is no longer a guide for us. We can move on to a discussion of expositions in sociological terms.

A Collection of Goods
Entering any pavilion of Expo '67, entering a pavilion of any international trade fair, mentally reconstructing almost any of the pavilions from expositions of the last century, one inevitably recalls the opening phrase of Karl Marx's Das Kapital, "The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities.'" But these goods, which generally are represented as visible signs of exchange value overcoming use value, take on in expositions another aspect, which was emphasized by Walter Benjamin in the essays he wrote some decades ago on nineteenth-century expositions and their influence on the culture of that period.

The world exhibitions glorify the exchange value of commodities. They create a framework in which commodities' intrinsic value is eclipsed. They open up a phantasmagoria that people enter to be amused. The entertainment industry facilitates this by elevating people to the level of commodities.*

The merchandise is "enthroned," as Benjamin says, "with an aura of amusement surrounding it." A boat, a car, a TV set are not for sailing, riding, watching, but are meant to be looked at for their own sake. They are not even meant to be bought, but just to be absorbed by the nerves, by the taut, excited senses, as one absorbs the vortex of projected colors in a discothèque. The fact that the goods exist does not make one want to own them; it is enough to look and listen, but to goods instead of to colors and music. Or else we "experience" goods with music and colors, but here the goods take on the value of a chromatic area, of a note or a scent. At such a display even those who possess few worldly goods do not feel humiliated. The merchandise becomes play, color, light, show. The objects are not desired in themselves, although the show is enjoyed as a whole; every wish is gone and what remains is pure amusement and excitement.

In this sense of an enormous collection of goods, an exposition could be seen as representing the Missa Solemnis of traditional capitalist society; thus it is ironic that in Montreal it was the Soviet Union's pavilion that conveyed the most feeling. There are many possible explanations. The first and most obvious is that a large part of the exhibition was designed by Western Europeans, from Italian companies, in

fact, who generally work on trade fairs. In designing the Soviet pavilion, they used the same exhibition techniques employed for commercial fairs. The second explanation is that in its struggle for prosperity and for more consumer goods, Soviet society has returned to the formal idiom of the industrialized society of the last century, just as realism in Soviet painting represented a return to the realism of the salons, the Beaux Arts of the nineteenth century. In this sense the Soviet pavilion, even if it looked dated (especially after the Lausanne exposition), represented progress in comparison with the style of official state art. This progress could be seen if one compared the pavilion itself with the big stone hammer and sickle in front of it, which was pure Stalin style.

But the third explanation is the simplest and the least flattering: The bug of grandeur kills invention. When a government wants to emphasize its productive hyperefficiency, it ends up suffocating the inventiveness of the designers. The Soviet pavilion, in its exhibitionism, became the pathetic brother of the French pavilion, which seemed more modern but was equally bombastic and false. The French interior showed the same self-satisfaction in displaying an immense collection of merchandise, even if the display was more sophisticated. The references to the future and to outer space in the French pavilion deceived no one. Externally its steel edifice, which appeared to be both powerful and delicate, was a construction of slender, nervous plates, and the interior displayed tensed steel cables, as in a sculpture by Lippold or Gabo, but these elements had no structural function: They did not support anything; they were added as pure ornamentation, pretending to have a function.

In such cases architecture is killed. Styling remains. The collection of goods inside confirmed this: A pompous display of a multitude of objects does not necessarily create anything. The
Russian and French pavilions seemed old because they were inspired by the concept of the last century's expositions (although these broke the ground for the architecture of the future with the Eiffel Tower and the Crystal Palace). They seemed old because they still displayed objects, whereas in our century industrial society has invented another kind of exposition. The exposition today does not display goods, or if it does, it uses the goods as a means, as a pretext to present something else. And this something else is the exposition itself. As in Lausanne in 1964, the Montreal exposition exposed itself.

How an Exposition Exposes Itself

In contemporary expositions a country no longer says, "Look what I produce" but "Look how smart I am in presenting what I produce." The "planetary society" has already standardized industrial production to such a degree that the fact of showing a tractor or a space capsule no longer differentiates one image of civilization from another. The only solution left is symbolic.

Each country shows itself by the way in which it is able to present the same thing other countries could also present The prestige game is won by the country that best tells what it does, independently of what it actually does. The architectural solutions confirm this view of expositions.

In order to understand the problem better, let us assume that architecture (and design, in its overall sense) is an act of communication, a message, of which the parts or the whole can perform the double action of every communication, connotation and denotation. A word or a phrase can denote something. The word "moonlight," for example,

means, unequivocally, the light that the earth's satellite gives off. At the same time it has a broader connotation depending on the historical period and education of the person who communicates or receives a message using the word. Thus it could connote "a romantic situation,"

"love," "feeling," and so on. In architecture, it seems at first that the inherent function of every item prevents us from regarding it as a message, as a medium of communication (a staircase is used for going up, a chair for sitting); if architecture communicates something, it is in the form of a symbol. The colonnade by Bernini in St. Peter's Square in Rome can be interpreted as an immense pair of arms, open to embrace all the faithful. Aside from this, a product of architecture or design is simply like a mechanism that suggests a function and acts on the user only as a stimulus that requires a behavioral response: A staircase, because it is one step after another, does not allow one to walk on a plane, but stimulates the walker to ascend. A stimulus is not a symbol; a stimulus acts directly at the physiological level and has nothing to do with culture.

But as Roland Barthes wrote in his Elements of Semiology, as soon as society can be said to exist, every use also becomes the sign of that same use. The staircase becomes for everybody the conventional sign to denote ascending, whether or not anyone ascends a given staircase in fact. The known connection between form and function mainly means this: The form of the object must fundamentally and unequivocally communicate the function for which the object was designed, and only if it denotes this function unambiguously is one stimulated to use it the way it was intended. The architectural product acts as a stimulus only if it first acts as a sign. So the object, according to the linguistic theory of de Saussure, is the signifier, denoting exactly and conventionally that signified which is its function.

Nevertheless, even if a chair communicates immediately the fact of sitting, the chair does not fulfill only this function and does not have only this meaning. If the chair is a throne, its use is not only to have somebody sitting on it; it has to make somebody sit with dignity, and should stress the act of sitting with dignity, through various details appropriate to royalty. For example, it might have eagles on the arms of the chair and a crown surmounting the back. These connotations of royalty are functions of a throne and are so important that as long as they are there, one can minimize or even forget the primary function of sitting comfortably. Frequently, for that matter, a throne, in order to indicate royalty, demands that the occupant sit stiffly (that is, uncomfortably) because providing a seat is only one of the meanings of a throne and not the most important one. More important are the symbolic connotations that the throne must communicate and whose communication reinforces its social function.

This continuous oscillation between primary function (the conventional use of the object, or its most direct or elementary meaning) and secondary functions (its related meanings, based on cultural conventions, and mental and semantic associations) forms the object as a system of signs, a message. The history of architecture and design is the history of the dialectic between these two functions. The history of civilization influences the history of architecture in such a way that objects in which the two functions were harmoniously integrated are in time deprived of one of these functions, so that the other becomes dominant; or else the original functions change, creating quite a different object.

The ruins of the Greek and Roman temples and amphitheaters provide an example of the first case, where the primary function, which was to gather people for prayer or entertainment, is largely absent from the mind of the contemporary viewer, who sees them in terms of their secondary functions, in the light of notions like "paganism" and "classicism" and the expression of a particular sense of harmony, rhythm, and monumentality. The Egyptian pyramids offer an example of the second case. Not only is their primary function that of a tomb, lost to us today; even their original connotation, based on astrological and mathematical symbolism, in which the pyramidal shape had exact communicative functions, has lost its meaning. What is left is a series of connotations established by history and "carried" by the monument. We recognize these connotations in the monument because we are educated to the same symbolism.

With its voracious vitality, history robs architecture of its meaning and endows it with new meaning. Some massive forms that have lost all original capacity to communicate, such as the statues on Easter Island or the stones of Stonehenge, now appear to be enormous messages, overcomplex in relation to the actual information they can communicate to us. But they may spur us to find new meanings instead, just as Chateaubriand, who could not understand the original social function of the Gothic cathedrals, interpreted them in new ways. The architecture of the contemporary exposition is used to connote symbolic meanings, minimizing its primary functions. Naturally, an exposition building must allow people to come in and circulate and see something.

But its utilitarian function is too small in comparison with its semantic apparatus, which aims at other types of communication. In an exposition, architecture and design explode their dual communicative nature, sacrificing denotation to very widespread connotation. If we look at the buildings in an exposition as structures to live in or pass through, they are out of scale, but they make sense if we look at them as media of communication and suggestion. The paradox in an exposition is that the buildings, which are supposed to last just a few months, look as if they have survived, or will survive, for centuries. In an exposition, architecture proves to be message first, then utility; meaning first, then stimulus. To conclude:
In an exposition we show not the objects but the exposition itself. The basic ideology of an exposition is that the packaging is more important than the product, meaning that the building and the objects in it should communicate the value of a culture, the image of a civilization. What Kind of Communication?

We know that the image of a culture can be communicated in various ways. Even the process of connotation has its own rules. It is based on a conventional code, which is less rigid than the code for denotation. "Moonlight" connotes "romantic moment" on the basis of a fairly widespread cultural code and connotes "Beethoven" on the basis of more complex cultural assumptions, which are less conventional in that they are accessible only to a few. An exposition can also communicate rather ambiguously, through "open symbols," giving a broad possible field of interpretation to the perceiver (because of this broad field such symbols are, of course, open to misinterpretation), or through less equivocal means.

Let us give four different examples. First, in the British pavilion in Montreal, in the center of a massive and irregular building, there was a tall, tapered tower, seemingly cut off before reaching its pointed apex. On the flat roof was a three-dimensional abstract composition inspired by

the Union Jack. Some might interpret this as "tension in progress," like a still moment in the process of growth, but others might recall a Celtic menhir. The interior, presenting a view of the progress of British civilization from Stonehenge to great contemporary scientists and writers, could suggest either interpretation; but the system of connotations worked inevitably at other levels, and it was difficult to make a connection between the building's suggestions and the image of contemporary Britain that we all have.

For the building, full of ingrown architectural recollections, appeared oddly opposed to the idea of the dynamic and open-minded country that produced Mary Quant, Bertrand Russell, and the Beatles, and seemed more to communicate an imperial pompousness, a Babylonian style, a taste for the monument aere perennius, for the Tower of Babel erected as a challenge to heaven and the centuries. So the fame of symbolic connotations generated continuous meanings, all quite contrary to the image that the country wanted to give of itself and tried to present in the interior. When a symbol is too open, it becomes ambiguous, overstepping the limits of communication.

Secondly, symbols can be conventionalized visually when their various graphic components are based on a unified, commonly understood code. For instance, a medieval allegory originates from the development of a metaphor, and the metaphor originates from a condensed similitude. When we compare the proud and farsighted eye of a king to the eye of an eagle, the eagle becomes in itself a symbol of triumphant royalty. This analogy could be used in allegorically depicting the story of a king. A similar procedure was used in the pavilion of the Province of Quebec. The external architecture of the building, clear and simple, was related to the interior, which had the same quality of rational simplicity.

Here, a series of geometric volumes—cubes, cylinders, and so on—was chosen to represent elements of the natural landscape, such as trees and water. Through a consistent use of these forms, the story of the inhabitants of Quebec was told—for example, how they harnessed the natural elements: water, forest, mines. The consistency of the symbolic, allegorical key reduced confusion, making the visit easy. Naturally the visitor should have had the key; but if he did not, he could simply enjoy the pleasant composition of volumes, of forms in space, and the contrast of colors. In this second case, moreover, the visitor could have a certain aesthetic experience, as if he were reading an ancient heroic poem without understanding its allegorical meaning, but nevertheless enjoying the flow of images and the rhythm of the story.

There is a third solution. It also involves using a series of symbols and a kind of allegorical representation, but symbols that are coded and recorded in the collective mind by long reiteration, as in a tale with familiar characters like a wolf, a shepherd, and a flock of sheep. In this case, well-rooted traditions make the allegory easily understood by a large group of people, as was true in medieval sculpture, especially in the portals and windows of cathedrals, which depicted religious representations using characters so standardized that they could be used as if they were linguistic signs. This was true of the United States pavilion, perhaps the best one at the exposition.

The large geodesic dome by Buckminster Fuller reflected its surroundings and at the same time revealed something of what was happening inside. Inside, it was visually open, but the objects and interior structures were still enclosed in a dome of light. Mystical and technical, past and future, open and closed, this dome communicated the possibility of

privacy without eliminating the rest of the world, and suggested, even achieved an image of power and expansion. The exhibited objects told, by their sequence, the history of the country and its myths. But to recognize these American myths, we did not need private keys because what were shown were typical symbols of the frontier, the Civil War, the ’20’s, the Western movie, the Broadway musical, pop art, the Space Age. Every display was universally recognized as a connotation of “Americanism.” The United States told its history clearly, in a way immediately comprehensible to everyone.

But, as in every act of communication, directness had its drawbacks. Clear communication was achieved at the cost of exaggerating the obvious and reducing the “information,” the surprise, the unexpected. The more straightforward the communication, the greater the danger of telling the recipient something he already knows. To a certain extent this happened in the U.S. pavilion.

The symbols were recognizable, but in the end they told us what we already knew, and thus they underscored a typical image of the United States, an image suggested to us by literature and film where, as in this pavilion, ironic observation and self-criticism are found along with the pride and optimism appropriate to any mythic vision. The only element that did not communicate what we already knew, but added something new, even if intangible and ambiguous, was the Fuller dome. In other words, the dome was aesthetically the strongest element of the pavilion, and it was so full of nuance, so open to different interpretations, that it affected the symbols inside and added depth to their easily identifiable, more superficial qualities.

Finally there is the case of a more traditional and direct denotative communication, based on codified symbols and the redundant integration of words and images, as in the very fine Israeli pavilion, where the story of the Jewish people was told clearly through a series of maps, pictures, captions, quotations, and so on. Only once in this pavilion was the picture-caption system abandoned, and symbolic suggestion used instead. This occurred in a large, otherwise empty room whose walls were struck by dramatic shadows. Here there was a memorial to the Jews exterminated by Hider, and it was composed of only two prominent elements: a photograph of a concentration camp and, in a glass case, a pair of children’s shoes, clearly found in a crematorium. But here, as in the American pavilion, the images were so charged with strong connotations, given them by long familiarity and repetition, that the mechanics of communication allowed no ambiguous connotations. We should say, though, that the way in which these well-known symbols were displayed revived them, and we saw them in a new light, through a sort of Verfremdung.

Three Possibilities for an Exposition of the Future Through these various methods of communication we can envisage three possibilities for an exposition of the future, beyond the conception of an exposition as a collection of goods. The first is an exposition as a collection of symbolic objects, in the sense of open symbols, as we have discussed them. This sort of exposition will be similar to much of contemporary art:

Communication will be ambiguous, and there will be many possible interpretations. We know that when this form of communication takes place it can have good results and increase the freedom and creativity of the recipient of the message, but the question is whether an exposition

should simply repeat, on a larger scale, the same thing that a painting or sculpture does.

The second possibility is the exposition as an educational instrument, a teaching device. This was the purpose behind the Canadian theme pavilions, in which difficult scientific and social problems were explained. But there are some “aesthetic fallacies” here. Some of the pavilions demonstrated how architects and designers employ teaching techniques but used them as composing elements for their own personal works of art. When a graphic artist designing a book jacket insists on omitting the author’s name or making the tide barely visible in order to have a “beautiful” jacket, legibility is sacrificed to “aesthetics” and the primary function of the book cover is completely betrayed. The case is obviously different when the artist abandons educational purposes and uses didactic elements to compose his own collage, whose meaning is no longer explanatory but, again, symbolic.

This category includes collages or assemblages made out of pieces of posters, street signs, book jackets, and the like, the purpose of which is to suggest a critique of that material but certainly not to teach anything that could be clearly put into words or sentences. However, when the aim is to teach and the method is that of the suggestive collage, the aim is betrayed. This is what characterized the theme pavilion “Man in the Community,” where, in order to suggest modern man alienated by today’s city, there were plaster figures a la George Segal enclosed in cages lined up along the walls of an enormous room. It is clear that in this case the symbolic communication was weaker than that of the original work of art, and it did not teach anything.

Other attempts of this kind, even if more successful, were still debatable. An example of this was the pavilion called “Man and Life,” where the functions of the brain and nervous system were represented. Here, without any doubt, the enormous model of the human brain, the diagrams of the nervous system, and the explanatory captions wanted to teach something. But graphic and architectural (and again, aesthetic) concerns made the visual experience stronger and more important than the didactic process; even the explanatory diagrams were used as elements in an architectural collage that existed for its own sake.

Consequently, the explanation was sometimes too difficult, sometimes too detailed, and sometimes just sketchy, and it was understandable only to those who already knew the material. This pavilion, though one of the most pleasant to visit, did not say enough to people who already knew how the brain functions and spoke too elliptically to the person who did not know. The same criticism could be made of other theme pavilions, such as “Man, His Planets and Space” and “Man and the Ocean.”

In these cases avant-garde art used pedagogic methods, but did not become educational. At best it reached the level of experiment, proposing new exhibition techniques not yet fully investigated. The solution to this contradiction lies not in these avant-garde forms, valid in their own sphere, but in avantgarde didactics, in a developing pedagogy, a revolutionary way of teaching. Thus expositions should utilize systems of popularized communication, valid for any visitor, which other means of communication, from TV to newspapers, cannot employ with equal intensity. I think we found a hint of these possibilities in some of the pavilions, such as Labyrinth, and in the section Man and His Environment in the pavilion “Man, His Planets and Space.” Film was used in both pavilions, but not in the usual way.

The Canadians, masters of experimental and documentary moviemaking, used different systems of projection on many screens or on panoramic screens of unusual sizes and format. Something similar had been attempted at the fair in Lausanne, but I think that here the simultaneous projection of many movies, the sense of rhythm, the contradictory or complementary play of competing images, the suggestion of new spatial effects, were superior to any known Cinerama techniques. Here the visitors, to whom humanity's history on earth was told with beautiful images, received a clear, informative message. They felt aesthetic emotion from communication that gave them ideas and data to think about, decisions to make, conclusions to draw. In this case, we can talk about a pedagogy of the avant-garde, because the communication was directed to educated and naive visitors alike, in such a way that both could get what they understood and were struck by. We still must ask ourselves if the enormous size of Expo '67 justified this sort of result.

But in a sense, this question is unfair. Even the least successful experiments contained some lessons, some suggestions for the art, architecture, and education of the future. It is in this sense that we can point to the true justification for an exposition: It is like an enormous experimental laboratory, not to be criticized for its immediate results, but for its bequest of suggestions and ideas for architecture and design. The best example of this experimental legacy was Habitat '67, designed by Moshe Safdie and David, Barott, Boulva. Habitat was an aggregation of 158 prefabricated cubic or rectangular units of different dimensions, assembled in an apparently free and spontaneous way to form a continuous rhythm, where the module led not to uniformity but to continuous variety.

In reality the criteria of combination were rigorous; each unit formed the terrace of the unit above, thus giving it more space and possibility for green areas. Habitat seemed to have reconciled the limitations of prefabrication and industrial mass production with those of a free and inventive way of living, full of fantasy, variety, and asymmetric vitality. Without doubt, Habitat was an example of intervention on the landscape. Its form was integrated with the surroundings, and, deriving its own irregular profile from Mediterranean terraces, it presented a fascinating silhouette against a Northern background.

Naturally we must still ask whether Habitat was so impressive because, with its diverting forms, it was so different from everything else surrounding it. Perhaps an area composed only of such Habitats would result in a monotonous and regimented landscape. But who knows? An exposition does not give final answers; it suggests experimental directions. Habitat performed this task, justifying (since it was charged with stimuli) the many useless forms which surrounded it. A Perplexing Conclusion Even if an exposition could be a perfect teaching device, as we have suggested, is it worth the expense and effort? To organize an exposition means to organize a teaching machine dedicated to all the peoples of the world.

But, as we know very well, the visitors to Expo (with the possible exception of the Canadians) were well-to-do people, and these people generally can obtain ideas from innumerable cultural sources. They are the ones who least need these universal teaching devices. The world is able to produce splendid expositions but cannot allow all its children to move freely (politically and economically) to attend the Expo school. An exposition anywhere inevitably becomes a sort of mass communication for élites. In a pessimistic moment we might thus become convinced of the uselessness of expositions (though still recognizing their experimental

and stimulating value). But we can draw other conclusions and make other hypotheses. For example: Isn’t it absurd that in our century we still build stationary expositions? Shouldn’t the designers of future expositions confront again the problem of Mohammed and the Mountain?

1967

The end