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“Expositions Universelles” as Sacred Places: A View from Modern Paris World Expositions

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INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on changes in the conditions and influence of world expositions based on analysis of the first London World Exposition (1851), the Paris World Exposition (1855), and subsequent, contemporary world expositions such as that held in Shanghai in 2010. The paper illustrates how world expositions with newly created exhibits in large-scale stage settings catch the public eye and attract huge audiences¹.

All the world expos—or, in French, *expositions universelles*—held in the 19th century displayed the most advanced technology of their host countries and revealed new industrial products invented in their times. In other words, *expositions universelles* have acted as showcases for the latest appliances and innovative machinery—as scientific laboratories exhibiting the industrial power of their host nations. As demonstrations of economic and political prowess, world expos have gained authority as “sacred spaces” that contribute to the expansion of innovative technologies and the influence of modern applied science.

As sacred spaces showing the systematic modernization of products, the London World Expo in 1851 and 1862 demonstrated Britain’s power in the mass production of industrial goods at the height of the Victorian Era. In contrast, the *Expositions Universelles* in Paris were designed to reveal not only France’s industrial power but also its understanding of the “universal intellectual order of knowledge (Figures 1 and 2).”

The “sacredness” of world expositions is evident from their influence on contemporary industrial activity and societies, namely in the new standards, methods, and orders that are revealed through each exposition’s contests. In this way, for industrial societies, a world exposition can be regarded as a space characteristic of “sacredness” or “sacred space” (Nakamaki 2007).

First, an analysis of the number of visitors to each exposition from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present provides an outline of “sacredness” based on scale. Next, an analysis of the first through fifth world expositions held in France (1855–1900) details each one’s number of participating countries and total site area, in addition to its number of visitors as mentioned above. It will be shown that modern France contributed greatly to the “birth of the world exposition” during this era. In addition, it is possible to gauge the “sacredness” of each world exposition in contemporary society, as institutionalized through



Figure 1 Innovation at Paris Expo, 1867: Automatic Lift *L'Illustration*, October 12, 1867



Figure 2 Paris Expo 1878: *L'Illustration*, May 1, 1878

the giving of medals to exhibits and the changes to “uniform themes” following the Chicago World Exposition in 1933 (Ichikawa 2010).

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF “SACRED SPACE”: 1851–2010

The institutionalization of “sacred space” in world expositions can be followed through each “general exposition,” from the exposition’s birth in mid-nineteenth-century Europe to the new millennium.

Figure 3 shows the long-term trend of total numbers of visitors since London’s Great Exhibition (London Exposition I). This is a barometer of the popularity and attraction of the world exposition as a “sacred space.” The overall trend is of increasing attendance, with little variation in the pattern. Over 50,000,000 people attended the Paris Exposition V in 1900, a little over eight times the number of visitors to the first Exposition in 1851 (IBE Sources).

Figure 4 shows the situation from the 20th century onwards. Since the Liege Exposition (1905), there has been an upward trend in the number of visitors, with two notable peaks for the Chicago Exposition (1933) after World War I and the Osaka Exposition (1970) after World War II. The figure also shows decreased attendance at expositions immediately following each of the highly popular ones (IBE Sources).

The target number of visitors for the Shanghai Exposition currently underway is 70

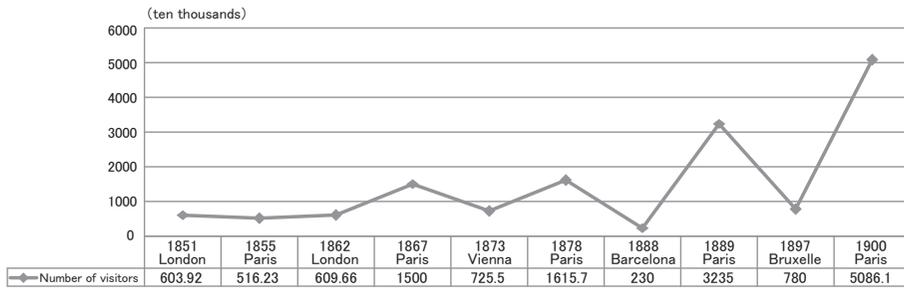


Figure 3 Long-term trend of number of visitors in European Expos (General Expo only)

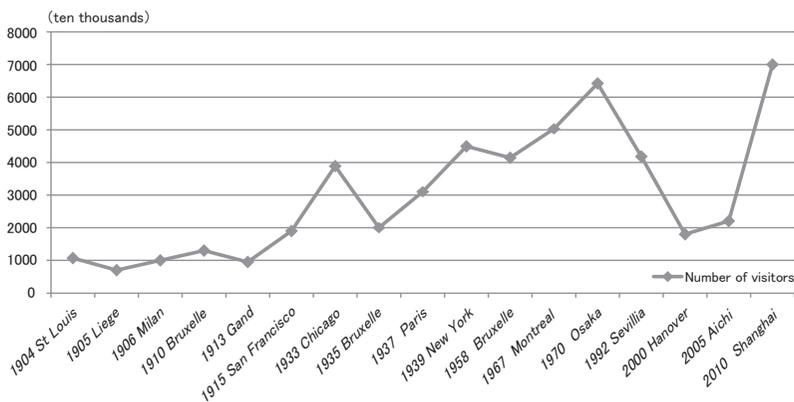


Figure 4 20th-21st centuries Expo visitors

million, a goal that if met would eclipse the previous record for attendance: Osaka’s 64.21 million in 1970. If the target is attained, the beginning of the 21st century may be viewed as a third peak in the history of world exposition attendance.

A world exposition is a major international event that brings a nation great prestige but also incurs huge construction costs. It therefore requires that the political and economic powers of the host nation are sufficient to bear these costs. This paper focuses on the four countries that have repeatedly held modern international expositions.

Figure 5 shows the GDP per capita at the time of each exposition held in Great Britain, France, the U.S., and Belgium between 1851 and 1913. It reveals that all four countries held expositions under conditions of continuous and steady economic growth. The circumstances in which expositions are held today are similar (Maddison 1995).

As shown in Figure 6, the world expositions in Japan and South Korea—both general and some local expositions—as well as the Olympic Games in both countries occurred in times of significant economic growth. The Tokyo Olympics (1964) and the Osaka Exposition (1970) were two large events hosted only six years apart. During that period of accelerated development, the real GDP per capita in Japan nearly doubled, from US \$5,514 to US \$9,448 (Maddison 1995).

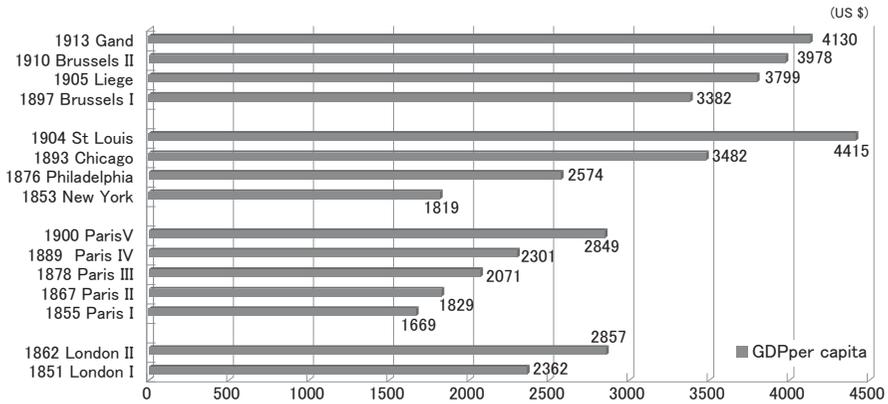


Figure 5 Real GDP per capita at World Expos

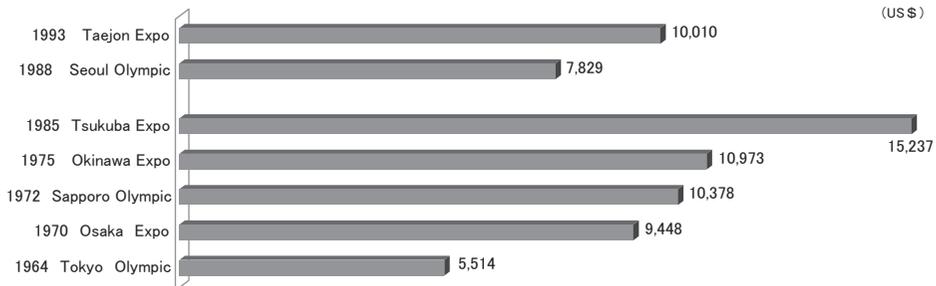


Figure 6 GDP per capita at Expos & events: Japan & Korea

THE EXPANSION OF “SACRED SPACE”: PARIS EXPOSITIONS I TO V

As shown in Figure 5, modern Paris was a “world exposition city” where world expositions were held six times over an 80-year period beginning in 1855. Paris contributed greatly to the establishment and expansion of the “sacred space” aspect of world expositions. The process by which this was achieved is shown in the following figures.

Figure 7 shows the numbers of visitors and participating nations at each Paris world exposition. The number of visitors increased steadily from the first Paris Exposition (1855) to the fifth Paris Exposition (1900), demonstrating an expansion of “sacred space” as measured by this criterion. The number of visitors to the sixth Exposition (1937) was lower. Figure 5 further demonstrates that a decline in the number of participating nations does not necessarily correlate with an increase or decrease in the number of visitors (IBE Sources).

Figure 8, meanwhile, compares the number of visitors and the site area. According to this figure, the trend in number of visitors is almost the same as the trend in the size of the site area. As site area correlates positively with number of pavilions, the latter may be responsible for increases in the number of visitors (IBE Sources; Ichikawa 2010).

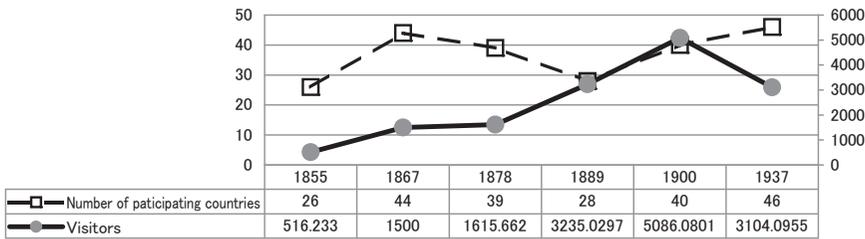


Figure 7 Visitors to Expo universelles Paris (General Expo)

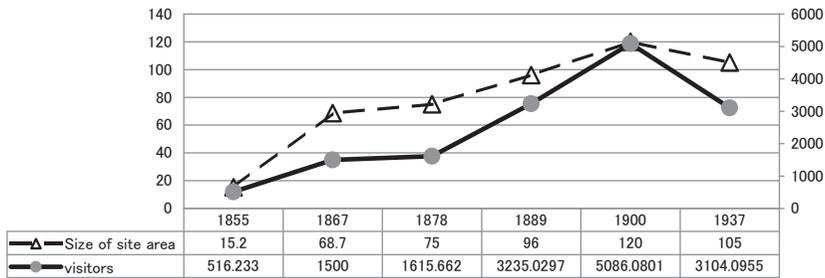


Figure8 Expo universelles Paris: size of site area

GIVING “SACREDNESS” TO MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES: “SACRED SPACE” AS A FUNCTION OF WORLD EXPOSITIONS

World expositions have influenced modern and contemporary societies in a variety of ways. This section focuses on the medals awarded at the expositions in order to study their effect on the development of industrial technologies in particular. It is argued that the contests at the expositions evaluated the industrial competency of each nation, established industrial rankings and standards, and conveyed considerable honor and prestige upon brands selected for their excellence. The “sacredness” that characterized world expositions encouraged the U.S. and leading nations in Europe to host the events, with companies and the general population flush with a competitive spirit, and attracted tens of millions of curious visitors to the sites (Ichikawa 2010).

As shown in Table 1, Great Britain held an industrial and technological advantage at the time of the first world exposition in 1851 (London Exposition I). Two types of medals were awarded to exhibits: the “Council Medal” for innovation and the “Prize Medal” for excellent workmanship.

The numerical figures in this table have been simplified to provide a comparison between the first host nation, Great Britain, and other nations. The percentage of Council Medals awarded to Great Britain is remarkably high in both the category of “machinery” and that of “metal goods, glass goods, and pottery.” This indicates the advanced levels of innovation in Great Britain at the time. It is also notable that Great Britain acquired more

than half of the total prize medals in both of the above categories, as well as many medals in the categories of “textiles” and “miscellaneous goods.” In the middle of the 19th century, industrialization in Great Britain, known as the “workshop of the world” enjoyed a competitive advantage due to the innovation and efficiency of its mass production industries and the traditional workmanship of its local production sectors.

It should be noted that France also made strenuous efforts in pursuit of medals at the first London Exposition. A significant number of Council and Prize medals went to industrial products from France, reflecting technical advances in both new and traditional industries and proving that modern France was producing goods with excellent design and high levels of technology. Although the U.S. was predominantly an agricultural economy at the time, it sent new models of machine tools for the mass production of standardized products to the first London Exposition, establishing an early base for its eventual industrial dominance. Engineers in Great Britain viewed these with wonder.

Engineers in Great Britain and France continued to compete in industrial technology on the stage of international expositions. As shown in Table 1–(2), at the third exposition (London Exposition II, which followed the second exposition, Paris Exposition II), France received 48% of the medals for general industrial products, while the U.K. received only 44% (Kashima 1992: 168). This indicates that the technical competitive power of France was on a par with that of Great Britain.

Table 1–(3) shows the total number of medals awarded in Paris Exposition IV in 1900, the 12th world exposition.

Table 1 Medals

(1) London Expo I, 1851: Medals Awarded

Category	Council Medal		Prize Medal	
	U.K.	Others	U.K.	Others
Raw materials	6	16	125	437
Machinery	52	36	301	191
Textiles	1	2	337	498
Metal goods, glass goods, & pottery	14	21	312	214
Miscellaneous goods	4	10	142	232
Art	2	2	27	60

(2) London Expo II, 1862: Medals Awarded to the U.K. and France

(Percentage of all medals for general industrial products)

France	48%
Great Britain	44%

(3) Paris Expo IV, 1900: Total number of medals given

Honorary Prize	2,827
Gold Prize	8,166
Silver Prize	12,244
Bronze Prize	11,615
Certificate of Merit	7,938

(The Government of Japan “*Report of Expositions Universelles 1900*,” Tokyo)

The continued evolution of world expos as manifestations of “sacred space” can be traced from the introduction of the “exposition theme,” first seen at the Chicago Exposition in 1933, as shown in the following table:

Table 2 Themes

1933 Chicago Expo	A Century of Progress
1935 Brussels Expo	Transport and Colonization on the 50 th Anniversary of Establishment of the Congo Free State
1937 Paris Expo	International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life
1939 New York Expo	Building the World of Tomorrow
1958 Brussels Expo	Evaluation of a More Human World
1967 Montreal Expo	Man and His World Land
1970 Osaka Expo	Progress and Harmony for Mankind
1992 Seville Expo	The Era of Discovery
2000 Hanover Expo	Humankind, Nature, Technology
2005 Aichi Expo	Nature’s Wisdom
2010 Shanghai Expo	Better Life, Better City

(BIE Sources)

A DIFFICULT ERA FOR WORLD EXPOSITIONS ?

When considering contemporary international expositions it seems we are reaching a difficult era. Pavilions of an expo compete against the digital world and other huge events that attract people’s attention.

The transformed aims of the early Great Britain expos

The expos in Great Britain, both internal and international, inherited a long history of several kinds of large exhibitions. They remained relevant by adapting their aims to current events and the priorities of each age.

As pointed out in Section 2 above, the first London World Exhibition (1851), which took place at the gorgeous Crystal Palace, highlighted Great Britain’s prestige, wealth, and technology with many innovative products and handmade fabrics.

The Franco-British Exhibition of 1908 in London, held after the Entente Cordiale between Great Britain and France in 1904, aimed “to promote a friendship between two nations which had historically experienced much friction” (May 2010: 31).

In 1924–25, the British Empire Exhibition again reminded the world of the value of the British Empire. After the Second World War, on the centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851, the country organized the Festival of Britain (1951) to highlight the nation’s unity, opportunities for modernization, and prospects for an affluent postwar society (May 2010: 43–51). Finally, the Dome of “The Millennium Experience” (The O2) opened on the 1st of January in 2000 with the aim of celebrating millennial events as if it were a world exposition (May 2010: 53–61).

From the long history of world expositions in Great Britain, one can see how such traditions survive by being flexible and reflecting the moods of changing times.

A view of world expos based on the Shanghai Expo (2010)

One of the keywords characterizing the Shanghai Expo is “casual.” The Expo exudes a casual atmosphere throughout, with visitors in witty T-shirts and posh outfits looking as if they were running everyday errands rather than attending a grand national event and the first world expo ever held in China (Photo 1).

For most visitors, the Shanghai Expo was one of many attractive places to be, not a rare, limited, special world. It was a casual, accessible event for many Chinese people, much like the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and the 60th National Foundation Day Ceremony in 2009.

Another key concept was “nothing new.” Since the beginning of the 21st century, visitors to the Expo have experienced and enjoyed the “virtual world” of digital networks and fine computer graphics. Everyday people can touch non-experienced things home and explore the unknown world without visits to expositions. Many Chinese visitors to the Shanghai Expo claimed, for instance, “There is nothing new at the Expo pavilions!” or “Nothing surprised me at the exhibitions!” even though they could play with the most advanced technologies of the “virtual world” at many of the Expo’s pavilions, just as visitors to the Aichi Expo had done in 2005 (Kato, Okada and Ogawa 2006: 189–191). Some even said that “the 2010 Expo had no impact on our lifestyle.”

What then is the *raison d’être* of an Expo today, when visitors no longer seem able to experience it as a “sacred space”? What elements attract people to an expo? After all, even if its attendees saw “nothing new” there, the Shanghai Expo saw a record number of visitors—over 70 million—in its first six months.

Many seemed to enjoy the pavilions, especially the foreign ones, which provided a real sense of other countries’ lifestyles and in some cases a taste of their cooking. For instance, the French Pavilion held demonstrations of French *cuisine* by famous French chefs



Photo 1 A scene from the “casual” Shanghai Expo, June 2010

every day, while on French National Day for the Expo (the 21st June, 2010), the Pavilion attracted huge crowds with live French music throughout the day and evening. The same situation occurred in 1970 in Osaka.

Although many people today enjoy virtual settings on the Internet every day, 21st-century Expos can still generate uniquely real experiences engaging all five senses with “demonstrations” and other events.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the “Era of the World Exposition” that began in Paris and London had fulfilled its original purpose by the middle of the 20th century; perhaps the era has now come to an end. There are some cases in East Asia of nations desiring “sacredness” at a world exposition and seeking to host one (or host the Olympics) after a period of regular and continued economic growth (Japan, South Korea, and China). Various newly industrializing nations, buoyed with increased economic power, are attracted by the “sacredness” of a world exposition. It is expected that they will enter as actors onto the stage of world expositions, bring their own styles into this “sacred space,” and create a new “Era of World Expositions” in the future.

NOTE

- 1) In this paper the focus is on larger-scale “general expositions” (rather than “special expositions” with specific themes).

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