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## **Reflections on Expo 2010**

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On October 31, 2010, one of the most successful International Expositions in history, Expo 2010, drew to a close in Shanghai. Virtually every country in the world was represented and there were several theme pavilions dedicated to the idea of “Better City, Better Life.” Numerous private corporations had pavilions and there was a special best urban practices area where individual cities put forth ideas on how to create liveable cities and a green environment. Expo 2010 attracted some 73 million visitors shattering the all time attendance mark of 64 million established by Osaka in 1970. (Montreal’s Expo 67 is now third with a still remarkable 52 million in 1967).

### **Some Good News about Canadian Participation**

There were a few good things about Canada’s involvement starting with the appointment of Mark Rowswell as Commissioner General of the Canadian Pavilion. A native of Toronto he has lived in China for more than 20 years where he is known as Dashan, a star on Chinese television. His presence gave instant credibility to the Canadian pavilion.

The government also made a wise choice in sending Governor General Michaëlle Jean to China to mark Canada Day at the Canadian Pavilion. It was meant to signal the importance Canada attached to Expo and the effort was surely appreciated by the Chinese government.

Finally the city of Montreal deserves mention for its small but effective presence in the Best Urban Practices section. It told the story of the transformation of a former limestone quarry and waste dump in St. Michel into a multi use urban park. Not many visited the pavilion but it was a good, example of what a city can do to improve the life of its citizens and fit perfectly in with the theme of the Expo. Vancouver, the only other Canadian city to participate took a very different approach. Its contribution consisted mainly of an exhibit of Canadian hardwoods and a fairly obvious attempt to increase sales to china. There was also a small exhibit on Vancouver’s Expo 86 and the subsequent conversion of the site to condominiums.

The real focus of Canadian participation was the 6000 sq metre Canadian Pavilion, one of the largest at Expo. No doubt the post Expo communiqués, audits and evaluations will paint a glowing picture of the Canadian pavilion which attracted more than the five million visitors that were anticipated. But when compared to other pavilions Canada came across as an old, stodgy, bureaucratic, and ultimately boring country. Is that an image we want to project?

Like many countries we had precious little to offer in the way of ground breaking urban planning, state of the art rapid transportation or imaginative green public policies but unlike

other countries we did not use the opportunity to highlight our natural attractions or discuss the past, present or future of China-Canada relations, or simply entertain.

The mediocre quality of the Canadian pavilion can best be appreciated by looking at what some other countries did. At least a dozen pavilions made prominent reference to the date of establishing diplomatic relations with China. None of them pre-dated Canada and yet there was no mention of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations we celebrated in October 2010.

In the Indian pavilion an entire wall honours Dwarkanath Kotnis, the Indian doctor who like Dr. Bethune treated Chinese soldiers during the Sino-Japan war of 1938 and like Dr. Bethune became a Chinese legend when he was killed. He was given more prominence by the Indians than Ghandi, Nehru or subsequent Indian leaders. There is no mention of Dr. Bethune in the Canadian pavilion!

In the Czech Pavilion the very first thing you see is a television screen showing Czech hockey players celebrating victory above an inscription which says "A Passion for Hockey". A visitor to the Canadian pavilion would have no idea that we play hockey.

The Danish Pavilion was specially designed so that it can be visited by bicycle on a track that runs around and through the pavilion with free bikes given out by the Danes to those who wanted to visit it in this way.

The Swiss Pavilion featured a chair lift that took visitors on a short ride around the roof of the pavilion offering one of the best views of Expo.

The Latvians constructed a vertical wind tunnel in the centre of their pavilion where two young men flew through space like superman or at least skydivers.

Angola had a small 4 D movie theatre and a striking 6 foot tall female hostess who happily posed for photos with Chinese and other visitors to the pavilion

The Saudi Pavilion, the most popular after the China pavilion, featured a "magic carpet" -- a moving sidewalk carrying people on a twenty minute ride through the circular pavilion while a movie was projected above, below and all around giving dramatic views of Saudi Arabia, followed by views of earth from space, and ending with a kind of psychedelic explosion of light and patterns that is so popular with the Chinese.

Taiwan also had a 720 degree spheroid theatre without the moving sidewalk but incredibly spectacular shots of earth and space. Afterwards each and every visitor was taken to a short musical interlude with a live entertainer followed by a cup of tea and a gift bag with souvenirs.

The United States, like Canada, had nothing much to offer in the way of urban policy or energy efficiency but it at least they tried to connect with the Chinese audience. Before entering the pavilion visitors were greeted by a host who entertained them with a David Letterman/Jay Leno

kind of monologue. When I was there it was offered by a 22 year old female American university student who regaled the crowds with patter in English, Chinese and Spanish.

Next was a movie that opened with a basketball player in a yellow jersey sinking a shot from midfield. He then turned around, looked into the camera, smiled and said Ni Hao (Hello). It was Kobe Bryant and the basketball mad Chinese loved it. The film continued in this vein with various famous and ordinary Americans extending their greetings to the Chinese. For humour it was interspersed with a group of college kids trying to memorize a sentence in Chinese and only managing to mangle the language until finally at the end they got it right much to the amusement of the audience.

In the middle of the film was a serious Obama speech about the importance of Chinese American relations. Everyone then moved to a second theatre where a classic American fantasy was shown about a little girl who wanted to plant a flower garden in her urban slum and the flowers kept dying until finally her neighbours, Asian, Black, Latino, joined in and helped her transform the slum into a beautiful flower garden.

Such fantasy will not solve the urban problems of America or the world but the two films and the rest of the pavilion gave a picture of America that will not be soon forgotten by the Chinese.

### **Opportunity Lost: The Canadian Pavilion**

Before entering the Canadian Pavilion visitors were shown a taped television greeting from Dashan. Once inside they proceeded along a narrow winding pathway with museum type inscriptions on the walls explaining Canadian history, duality, federalism, responsible government and so on. The small writing, the dim lighting and the subject matter ensured that not one in a thousand visitors stopped to take in the material. The next section opened up into a larger room which included some games for younger visitors such as you would find in a science and technology museum. This room also contained the bulk of the information on Canada's approach to better cities and better urban life. There was a panel on social values, another on social harmony and another on social inclusion. That apparently is the state of urban life in Canada and if you do not understand it is probably because you are not one of the bureaucrats in Ottawa who must have come up with the inane prose and unintelligible language.

The final part of the pavilion was a film intended to show a day in the life of Canada with pictures from many cities across all four seasons. It was called *Glimpses* and was made by the National Film Board but this was hardly the Board's finest hour. We are shown, for example, a farmer's market at 6 am, rush hour on highway 401, a winding street full of restaurants in Montreal or Quebec city. The film had no sound, the "theatre" had no chairs or doors so people wandered in and out throughout the twelve minute presentation.. After the theatre it was out the door and into the court yard where there was a small snack shop and souvenir stand.

Most disturbing of all was the complete absence of any real live Canadians. It was a completely virtual experience. The only humans present, the girls who stamped Expo passports, were Chinese volunteers and anyone who had a question or just wanted to talk to a Canadian was out

of luck. Apparently a few Chinese speaking Canadian students were hired but they were not in evidence in the parts of the pavilion open to the public.

Aside from Dr. Bethune or hockey what else was not in the Canadian pavilion? There was, of course, nothing about Pierre Trudeau and the opening of relations with China but there was also nothing about prominent Chinese-Canadians like Adrienne Clarkson or others who might be of interest to a Chinese audience. There was nothing about basketball player Steve Nash (probably the best known Canadian in China at the moment), or Leonard Cohen, whose works have been translated into Chinese. There was no history such as the Chinese contribution to building the railway in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the wheat sales to China in the 1950s under John Diefenbaker and Alvin Hamilton. Amazingly there was nothing about Niagara Falls, the Rocky Mountains, the Great Lakes, the RCMP, the CN Tower, Polar Bears, or the Blackberry.

The “creative consultant” to the Canadian pavilion was *Le Cirque du Soleil*. That sounded like a good idea as the *Cirque* has a deep connection with Shanghai through the world famous Shanghai Acrobats. Whatever their acrobatic prowess the *Cirque* certainly was out of their depth when it came to content. Even the publicity about the *Cirque* entertaining visitors was vastly overblown. They may have done a few shows for special occasions but the vast majority of visitors to the Canadian pavilion did not see any sign of the *Cirque*. If you wanted live entertainment better go to the pavilions of Romania, Taiwan or Philippines where some kind of live cultural performance was offered every day to every single visitor.

As with all International Exhibitions the Expo site will be dismantled except for a half dozen buildings but before Expo 2010 fades into distant memory let us resolve to do a better job of presenting Canada to the world as we prepare for the next Expo scheduled for Yeosu Korea in 2012. The theme “The Living Ocean and Coast” is not likely to attract as many countries or visitors but if we are going to participate in future Expos let us have one of the best pavilions instead of one of the worst. .