

*Gelernter, David. 1939: The Lost World of the Fair. New York: Avon, 1995.

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1939: THE LOST WORLD OF THE FAIR

["Imagining the Future: The 1939 World's Fair at Flushing Meadows, Queens"]

[...From the diary of Hattie Glassman, who visited the Fair as a 20-year-old and provides an extensive description of Futurama and the Avenue of Tomorrow and other exhibits dedicated to the Future...]

Now I've always been fascinated with the world my parents grew up in, I mean the actual *look & feel* of it, because the change between that time and this seems so uncannily large, as if five centuries had passed and not five decades, & the war makes a sort of opaque wall dividing that time from my own . . . My father would have been seven in 1892 & my mother two years old and I actually hear, as we stroll, an elderly lady repeating (did I imagine it?) *Yes, this was it, this was just the way it was* . . . (No! I remember her hideous goat-blue hat.)

I have always wanted so badly to feel what that time was like—because of a strange belief I suppose I was born with—that if, somehow, I could *feel* an era before I was born, the scales would fall from my eyes & I would then be able to feel my own life, grasp what it is really like, the way you can grasp time after the fact, when it is all over . . . well . . . you see a washing tub with scrub board in one house, a wooden Indian, an oil- and gaslamp store, a theater. In a hairdresser's store, there are life-like dummies showing a lady with the waist-length (longer?) hair of that era in the process of having it dried with a palm-leaf fan.

*(On Reserve at the Laguardia & Wagner Archives, E-238)

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I don't have to belabor the point, I expect, that the Avenue of Tomorrow is a good bit nicer. It's bright & ritzy-looking with modern shops, fancy streetlights, fancy cars poised at a perpetual red light & skyscrapers in the distance. You leave by way of the forty-foot waterfall.

Walking out through the glass tunnel is marvelous—a ton of water pounds down roaring & frothing-up around you, and you can't hear the voice of the person beside you; except you do feel slightly cheated that you can't *feel* anything—the glass tunnel deposits you well away from the falls onto a bridge over a shallow moat. Somehow it is too anti-septic (that is not the word)—one wants to be misted, at least a little. Or maybe I am merely trying to say, it is getting hot & I am getting tired & ever-more aware of *my feet*. My marriage and my feet are marked out henceforth as Predominant Themes, as Miss Acheson would say. There are beds of red begonias or something in the courtyard. The wonders of electricity point is well made, but it is the old-fashioned street that stays with you. It is one of the most evocative things at the Fair.

In 1939 technology, as I have mentioned, was not remote and esoteric. It was down-to-earth. And its achievements were heroic.

In the factories of the pre-electrified age, lighting was dim and layout was dictated by the web of overhead shafts and leather belting that connected each machine to the central steam engine or water turbine. In 1939 middle-aged workers remembered that kind of factory. The routines of daily life had changed dramatically within living memory: In the late nineteenth century a bathroom was something of a luxury. If you didn't have one, you'd set up a tub in the middle of the kitchen floor. Bathing was a traditional Saturday-night production number.

Housewives were the beneficiaries of the most important technological revolution of the century, a revolution that made it possible for wives who couldn't afford servants to devote themselves largely to a job or—more revolutionary still, because they had always *been* laborers—to their children. The Utilities' brochure documents the rise of electric appliances between 1923 and the fair: a roughly three-fold increase in vacuum cleaners, four-fold in washing machines, 250-fold in refrigerators. Any adult on the fairgrounds would have dealt with the iceboxes of the prerefrigerator age. A chunk of ice in a chest-high cabinet on top, a drip pan on the floor below, typically three narrow shelves in between. Forgetting to empty the drip pan was a classic kitchen accident. Refrigerators transformed the ways people shopped, cooked and spent their time.

"At every turn," writes a modern historian of the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition, "fairgoers were bombarded with pamphlets urging them to make use of the latest scientific research in industrial laboratories to modernize their kitchens."

It takes an intellectual to suggest that women had to be brainwashed into wanting electric kitchen appliances.

Fairgoers who trooped through the Electric Utilities exhibit were directly plugged into the dawn of the electricity age. It was no ancient saga to them. Gerald Wendt comments on a new power plant in Brooklyn. "The single units in this station produce 160,000 kilowatts as compared with a maximum of 50,000 in stations built in 1924, with 5,000 in a station dating from 1901, and with the sixty kilowatts in Edison's original installation at Pearl Street in New York in 1882." Nowadays technical-minded people over thirty get a certain feeling when they contemplate a computer. They can visualize the vastly weaker machines of the past; when they do they are apt to experience full force, like a faceful of sunshine, the flat-out marvelousness of modern technology. In the fair's age *anyone* over thirty

might have experienced that same sensation whenever he looked at an electric outlet.

Many other technologies at the fair were as down-home and vital as electricity. Take automobiles. Technology had done it again: Within living memory it had changed all the rules, changed the world and made life tangibly better for vast numbers of people. Many 1939 fairgoers remembered 1911. In that year a Michigan county commissioner first conceived the idea of painting lines down the center of roads. The Lincoln Highway, connecting New York and San Francisco, was completed in 1927. It was the country's first continuous coast-to-coast roadway; it consisted mainly of existing roads patched together. Most 1939 fairgoers would have remembered the hoopla when the patching together was finally completed twelve years before. The Lincoln Highway was finished to specifications that called for cars to be driven at thirty-five miles per hour and trucks at ten. By 1939 it was absurdly outdated.

Between 1927 and 1939 cars had gotten better and more plentiful—and of course they'd made new problems in the process. But in 1939 technologists and designers seemed to regard those new problems—not only the safety problem but everyday down-to-earth issues like preventing traffic jams—as important and worthy of attention. In the 1930s, for example, Yale University had a Bureau for Street Traffic Research. (It no longer has one.) The Futurama, wrote Geddes, was exactly "a visual dramatization of a solution to the complex tangle of American roadways."

Today, relatively few technologists are intrigued by the question of how Mrs. Schwartz can shave half an hour off her weekly trip to the shopping mall. We have more significant things to worry about. We have goals that are more important than merely making people's lives easier in modest ways.

Our own characteristic technological marvel is the com-

puter. The fair had no inkling of computers. It did foresee technologies that *depend* on computers, in their modern forms. Computers, no; robots, rocket ships and sophisticated highway-control systems, yes. H. G. Wells describes teleconferencing:

Even the existence of business centers is no longer imperative. It is so close a Tomorrow it is almost Today when it will be possible for a dozen men or a score of men to sit in conference, seeing and hearing each other, by radio, television, telephone, when bodily they are hundreds of miles apart. All that this exhibition of the World's Fair will show plainly.

And the fair asked questions of the sort that computers induce *us* to ask: "Network of communications systems makes for speedy exchange of ideas; can we improve the spiritual side of life as we did the physical apparatus? Can serious breakdown be avoided in such a complex system?"

But computers would have been an astonishing novelty at the fair. Have they revolutionized everyday life to the extent electricity, cars, phones, movies, radio, kitchen appliances did in the thirties? I am inclined to say no. They have certainly revolutionized science, engineering and other specialized areas. Otherwise they are a big help, some of the time; but they have rarely changed the rules fundamentally.

Consider the production of text. Word processors and computer printers have made the logistics dramatically easier. On the other hand, technology pundits began in the early 1970s to forecast the demise of the book. And in the last few years, notebook computers have indeed given us the wherewithal to do away with books if we want—except, we don't want. It turns out that books are no mere stopgaps on the road to computers; they are ergonomic masterpieces, and they are here to stay. We have made some progress

toward "paperless offices," but we are still adrift in a gale of paper that dogs us wherever we go, from birth certificates through owner's manuals, license renewal forms, deeds, titles, dollar bills and whatnot, not to mention a million drafts on paper of the typical word-processed, computer-printed book. Life in the text world goes on; the rules have changed, but not all that much. Not fundamentally.

One more example. Computers have changed the logistics of architecture. A computer-drawn picture of a building can be produced in far less time than a typical hand drawing—and is probably better to boot. If ever there were a clean victory for technology, this is it. *Except*: one glance at the work of a brilliant architectural draughtsman—a Benjamin Latrobe, Hugh Ferriss, Frank Lloyd Wright—will convince you that such drawings are in a fundamentally different class from anything a machine has ever produced or ever will. If computers make the average architectural rendering cheaper and better and the odd genius remains free to do as he likes, that is a big step forward. But if they cause peaks and valleys to be replaced by a featureless plateau of acceptable mediocrity—is that a victory?

Surveys suggest that more home computers are used for game playing than anything else. There's nothing wrong with toys. Recreation is important to our quality of life. Computers have brought us lots of ingenious new entertainments. But compare those new entertainments to the ones that were new or newish in the thirties: electric recordings, radio, talking pictures, television. The "newness" of computer games is real but trivial in comparison.

And meanwhile, computers have caused as well as solved big problems. Our institutions stagger under killing loads of complexity. Creating thousand-page bureaucratic rulebooks and million-line budgets is a lot easier when you have computers to help.

Computers are powerful and wonderful machines, and they

do have the *potential* to change everyday life radically. But for my money they haven't yet. An imagination deficit among software builders, complacency and low standards on the users' part have killed any chance of a real computer revolution so far. That conclusion is controversial (I have discussed it elsewhere); for now, I am content to leave it at this: In the high thirties, technology had accomplished breathtaking things.

That was the age of technology par excellence. Technology then dealt in the tangible and the everyday, not in strange stuff like software and silicon. Technology meant refrigerators and radios. It was about new ways to build bridges, dams and skyscrapers, not about space stations and supercolliders. It was about Lucite and Plexiglas, both on display at the fair. It was about nylon stockings—available as of December 1939—and rayon and cellophane. It was about *elevators*: Visiting from France, Le Corbusier, ordinarily a fierce critic of all things American, was enchanted by American elevators capable of powering big loads up and down thousand-foot buildings in a flash.

We sometimes think of ours as *the* technology age, but that's nonsense. Older people on the 1939 fairgrounds had lived through the most spectacular technology-driven world transformation in history. One late-thirties account lists achievements and discoveries of the previous forty-five years. It is a long list, but worth contemplating in full:

Motion pictures, silent and sound; photo-electric cells; electron beams; radio direction beams; wire photos and electronic television; oil cracking; internal combustion engines, gas, gasoline and Diesel; automobiles; airplanes; X-rays, Gamma rays; radioactivity; the gyrocompass; turbine engines; steam boilers carrying pressures of over 2,000 pounds to the square inch; high-speed steel and a thousand new and

marvelous alloys; vast improvement in the generation and distribution of electricity; synthetic rubber and silk.

Furthermore "the colloids and the vitamins have arrived," and "the atom is smashed." By the way, "many of these things will be shown at the New York World's Fair."

At the groundbreaking ceremony on Flushing Meadow, La Guardia turned up the first clump of earth with a rusty 150-year-old spade. "This is the way they did it 150 years ago," he couldn't help but remark; "over there," pointing to a steam shovel, "is what we use today." It's been a long time since we were capable of taking pride in a power shovel. We cannot understand the fair unless we grasp the extent to which 1939 technology had changed plain, everyday life for the better.