

(More on the description of Futurama and other exhibits that 'predicted' the growth of suburbia in American life in the 1940s and 1950s.)

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Into the Fair

On Thursday, May 18, 1939, a young woman in a blue dress and white sweater stirs and awakens on a bench at the New York World's Fair.

She had been asleep cradled in the right arm of Mr. Mark Handler, her head resting on his shoulder. Handler was a slim, tallish man in a blue tie and tan poplin suit, a year older than she. He had brown hair verging on red and a boyish face that was often thoughtful (evidently she thought him "cute" at such times). His smile is "comforting & kind beyond his years." In his left hand he holds a copy of the fair's daily newspaper folded in half; he'd read everything visible and then stopped because he hadn't wanted to wake her by rattling the pages. ("Tallulah Reads Ode to Tree. Tallulah Bankhead, famous Broadway dramatic actress, will recite an

original ode at the planting of an authentic Royal Oak . . . *Fair Gardens a Fairyland of Colors . . . Official Program of Today's Special Events . . . Bloomingdale's speaks 27 languages. A staff of interpreters at our World's Fair Service Center . . .*")

A pigeon breaks its descent with outstretched wings and lands near his left foot, pecks casually at the asphalt walk and takes off again. ("The pedestrian finds it pleasant to stroll at the Fair," says the 1939 guide, "where the walks are of bituminous asphalt, which has been found much 'easier' on feet than either concrete, wood or other hard surfaces.") The odor of cigar smoke passes before him with a stately, solitary gentleman.

For the last twenty minutes he'd been looking around, affably watching the procession of fairgoers; turning frequently to his left to take in the Trylon and Perisphere, which fill up the middle third of his visual field. In an age in which abstract painting is still a relatively new and debatable proposition ("voices had risen in lively controversy," says a novel of the 1930s, "over the new play, the new strike, the new Moscow trials, the new abstract show at the Modern Museum"), the Trylon and Perisphere are the closest we have ever come to a major piece of abstract architecture.

What did he see? In 1939 one didn't dress quite as one does today, and although this is not news and everybody knows, generally speaking, how things used to be different, I think we would find the actual sight of it startling. In 1939 men wore suits or occasionally sport jackets to a fair. Women wore dresses or sometimes a blouse and skirt. Most adults wore a hat. In warm weather the men's hats are often straw boaters, and jackets may be removed, but ties stay on no matter what. Children are dressed like miniature adults, in jackets and ties or dresses or skirts, except that the boys might be wearing shorts or knickers. We know all this; but I think we would find the procession passing before

Handler that Thursday morning as strange as we would a tie-and-jacketed, dress-or-skirted entourage frolicking on a beach.

I can't say precisely where Handler was sitting. But I do know that he had a clear view of the Trylon and Perisphere, and I conjecture that he was sitting somewhere to the south of them. "After half an hour or so," we learn, Hattie "stirred and stretched and stood up & Mark gave me a squeeze & then, though he'd wanted to see General Electric, we spontaneously walk off in the opposite direction toward the Trylon and Perisphere. They draw one like rubber bands." We also learn that he calls her Laurie, from her middle name (Hortense Laura Glassman), and that "on the way I first raised the topic of children, which he & I both understood as an invitation to the effect that he might now ask to marry me. When I do he stops dead—turns to me & rests both hands on the side of my arms, such a turbulent face—but then says not a word! & we walk on."

His features were average, and I assume he blended into a crowd. She was striking, with wavy short hair cutting south across her forehead—sort of a flapper style that I associate more with the twenties—and pronounced cheeks, a slightly too-prominent chin, parted lips and soft wide eyes. Earlier, on their way to the bench, she writes that they had

walked down the mall away from the theme center—fountains everywhere which mist you as you walk past, & with the bright sun on the water & flags snapping & the whole place so gleaming, colorful & gay, it just makes one thoroughly happy, exhausted as I was. The Fair is a place where wonderful things are all around, buildings with tall aquamarine waterfalls rushing down their faces, with automobiles driving round their rooftops, with lush purple-lit scenery that you fly over in gliding easy-chairs; you have read & heard &

seen so much about these buildings beforehand—Italy's waterfall, Ford's Road of Tomorrow & now, you turn a corner & there it is!—it is like the morning in '36 when we saw the President. At first as we hurried forward I saw nothing but orange leaves, long dark automobiles & a sea of faces, and then my father pointed—& it was *his* face. It is exciting just to be on the grounds.

After she reports on her nap, the account cuts back to their arrival an hour earlier:

Upon disembarking Mark buys a map & a *Today at the Fair* at a small umbrella'd stand near the station. He has borrowed a *Guide*. The instant you leave the station the blare of color hits you like the wall of sweet summer air outside an air-conditioned movie theater. This is a golden-yellow zone and the yellows are vivid. (Even the inside of the station was colorful, an unusual purplish.) My plan for our Official Entrance is *not* to cut away from the station forty-five degrees to the right & make straight for the Trylon & Perisphere, but rather to stride off in the opposite direction & then, when we hit Rainbow Avenue, to make for the enormous long mall, stubbornly *not looking* to my right—Mark does likewise, teasing & obliging me simultaneously as usual. We make straight for the bridge over the long blue pool that runs up the mall's middle—& then we wheel round triumphantly & *there*, at the climax-point of the double-ranks of green trees rushing forward like a drum roll, over the long pool stretching before us, through the mist of the fountains, beyond the cheerful white statuary & to the other side of the huge George Washington *there* is the Trylon and there is the Per-

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isphere. It is a *beautiful* vista. Having brought Mark to just this spot I accept full personal credit for the view. Mark concedes he is deeply impressed.

"At certain rare moments," the diary continues,

one has a feeling of being exalted, physically lifted for a moment without effort as if you are afloat with eyes closed & a wave swells up beneath you—& then rolls away again; you feel directly linked to the Fair as if it were intended just for you; the future *does seem lovely* & you are quite sure that everything will be all right in the end. And I felt just that way as we gazed together down the beautiful mall.



The Perisphere was set in a shallow pool and propped up by a ring of square columns only thirty feet or so out from its bottom. It sat in its ring of columns like a basketball in an egg cup, further steadied only by the walkway joining it, a quarter of the way up, to the Trylon. The Perisphere had been intended to seem as if it were floating on jets of water. Postcards printed in advance show a water dome of arching fountain sprays, with the Perisphere nestled in a hollow on top. But the great sphere proved insufficiently watertight. The fountains had to be scaled back, and you could see the mirrored supporting columns plainly.

So after my little nap here we are approaching T&P down Pioneers Avenue. From this angle the Trylon stands to the left & in front of the Perisphere. You inevitably grow excited as you draw closer to this huge looming structure amidst crowds all streaming T&Pward. It is unclear till you get close

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how you actually get into the thing. But it turns out that there is a ticket booth (the long line moves pretty fast), then you enter a chrome door in the front face of the Trylon & step onto one of two side-by-side escalators. The escalators are enormous and of stainless steel, the longest in the world (naturally!)—they rear up before you like roller coasters, proposing to carry you upward from the floor of the Trylon across the narrow space separating it from the Perisphere, then into hatches halfway, roughly, between the Perisphere's equator and the ground. You catch your breath as you step on—and then they are eerily silent—which inspires the crowd, too, to fall reverently silent, & you have the sensation of being some sort of minor tidbit that has been scooped up & is being conveyed into the heart of a top-secret electro-something in the Saturday serials; you have a real sense of drama. But the getting-inside process is nothing next to *being* inside.

(The typical escalator of this period had wooden treads and emitted a steady clickety-clack and the occasional clonk.)

Inside the Perisphere you step off the escalator onto one of two balcony-rings rotating slowly in opposite directions, one directly above the other. As you step onto the balcony you are inside a short tunnelloke section, but you soon rotate out of the tunnel into the great awesome space of the Perisphere itself. There is a several-foot gap between the sphere's inner wall & the edge of the balconies—evidently they are supported from below, but they seem to float. You sail slowly into orbit. Below you the model is like a vast round pool, with immeasurable great echoing spherical vastness when you look up. The bigness of this space is such that you feel it

in your stomach. The huge dome lit with blue. I know it is absurd to compare it to a medieval cathedral, but that great, shivery-vast feeling of enclosed space . . . It almost makes you dizzy to look up. That falling-backwards feeling . . . As I take it all in I experience again that upswelling moment of exaltation.

Down below is Henry Dreyfuss's Democracy, a representative American city and surrounding suburbs of 2039. Spectators on the balconies have the impression of viewing the landscape from the lordly height of seven thousand feet. On the banks of a river, the model city radiates outward in widening concentric half circles round a single towering skyscraper in the center. Power is generated by a great hydroelectric plant on the riverbank, inspired by FDR's much-admired Tennessee Valley Authority. The rolling countryside is full of towns and parks. It is the definitive high-thirties utopia.

By "high thirties" I mean, roughly speaking, the period beginning in 1936—the year the electorate turned to Roosevelt not in desperation, as in 1932, but in breathless wild approval. The day after FDR pulverized Republican Alf Landon in an unprecedented landslide, there were parties all over the country. "If he were to say a kind word for the man-eating shark," the *New York Times* opined of Roosevelt soon after that event, "people would look thoughtful and say perhaps there *are* two sides to the question." The Republicans stormed back in 1938, but Roosevelt's personal popularity remained high.

In 1936 John L. Lewis's newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations sparked a nationwide revival of labor unionism. In October 1935 at the annual American Federation of Labor (AF of L, as it was invariably called) convention, Lewis had punched Bill

Hutcheson in the face. That was a significant punch, as punches go. Hutcheson was head of the Carpenters Union and an old-line crafts union man. Lewis wanted industrial and not crafts unions: not a union of all and only carpenters, but an "auto workers" or "steel workers" union. He quit the AF of L and founded the CIO.

In 1936 an English graduate student in mathematics named Alan Turing completed work on a paper, "On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the *Entscheidungsproblem*," that laid the basis for the theoretical study of computers—thus in a sense for the postwar world. This technical paper is also, in its way, part of the thirties fabric. Turing had left Cambridge for Princeton to study with a great mathematician, arguably the greatest of the century. John von Neumann was a Hungarian Jew by birth. He had been teaching in Germany and had left for the United States in 1933. "If these boys continue for only two more years," von Neumann had said of the Nazis, "they will ruin German science for a generation—at least." And so they did. The mass escape to the United States during the 1930s of European scientists, including Einstein as well as such non-Jews as the great physicist Erwin Schrödinger, decided the war. Many of the émigré scientists played key roles in developing the atomic bomb for the United States. More important, they did *not* develop the atomic bomb for Germany. Their absence doomed the German bomb project. After the war von Neumann went on to lay the practical basis, as Turing had the theoretical, for the computer age.

In 1936 Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace burned to the ground. Elderly visitors at the 1939 fair might in principle have seen every one of history's greatest world's fairs, except for the very first—the London Exposition of 1851, housed in the famous glass-and-iron palace. They might have visited Philadelphia in 1876 and seen the American Centennial exhibit, Paris in 1889 to view the brand-new Eiffel Tower—the only world's fair centerpiece more cel-

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ebred than the Trylon and Perisphere. (Eavesdropping on the high thirties is one of my goals. When that era looked at the Eiffel Tower it saw the archetypal "skyscraper skeleton"; alternatively, "Paris's ugliest landmark.") A hypothetical elderly globetrotting visitor at the 1939 fair might have seen the famed "White City" in 1893—the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago—and the Saint Louis Exposition in 1904, the San Francisco and San Diego Fairs in 1915, Chicago's Century of Progress in 1933. He might even have seen the Crystal Palace on Sydenham Hill, where it stood after its removal from Hyde Park until 1936. (There had been a previous World's Fair in New York, as a matter of fact, in 1853 and '54, but hardly a great one. It had been housed in a leaky building at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street.)

Nineteen thirty-six was the year the big bands arrived, under the auspices of Benny Goodman, "the man who started it all." Goodman had been attracting crowds since the summer of 1935. But it was October 1936 when the Goodman band made its New York debut in the Manhattan Room at the Pennsylvania Hotel on Seventh Avenue. For the next ten years (until they abdicated in favor of their own vocalists) the big bands dominated popular music.

In 1936 a group of army officers posted to Spanish Morocco rebelled against the Popular Front government in Madrid. Officers all over Spain joined them, and the Spanish Civil War was on. Italy and Germany jumped at the chance to aid the right-wing rebel forces. After some hesitation Stalin poured the resources of the U.S.S.R into the fight on the Loyalist side, helpfully including secret police operatives to give the Spaniards tips on organizing things. The Spanish Civil War—were you for the republic and what were you *doing* about it?—became *the* moral touchstone of the thirties.

Nineteen thirty-six was the year *Life* magazine was born, and ground was broken at the fair. "High thirties" is a culture centered

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on New York City. As such it leaves out a great deal but sets the tone for much of the rest of the country. In 1939 New York City's population of seven-and-a-half million exceeded the population of any state in the Union, including the rest of New York State itself. A conventional witticism referred to the city as "the forty-ninth state." After London it was the largest city in the world. New York was hardly the apple of every eye; it was no object of undivided admiration from coast to coast. "New York is accused of being parochial as well as un-American," Robert Moses wrote in 1943. "There is something in this observation." And yet "it's curious," said a novel of the thirties. "After the war New York . . . Nobody can keep away from it . . . New York's the capital now."



"Mark whispers 'the architecture in the model is blasé, but the *drama* of this place!'" The buildings generally resemble those in the Futurama and, for that matter, the real buildings of the fair itself. They are streamlined modern. Handler had recently completed a B.S. in electrical engineering and had been admitted to the MIT doctoral program in civil engineering—though had deferred admission to work a year or two as an engineer for the Parks Department of the City of New York. His real love was architecture.

"The show has daytime & nighttime segments," the diary continues:

A recorded narrator describes this amazing though idiotically-named "Democracity" (even "Futurama" is a less-stupid name, though not by much) & its surroundings. The center of the city is full of air & light . . . & no-one lives there! People pour into town & outwards to great parks in the countryside over fancy high-speed roads *à la* Futurama.

They live in beautiful green towns. Those who don't work in the city live in towns clustered round the factories where they do work. As night falls the domed sky grows dark & stars come out. It is gorgeous, uncannily like a real night sky. The lights in the model city come on & it sparkles like a dream-world.

(In the show's night-time segment, ultraviolet spotlights mounted beneath the revolving balconies picked out fluorescent paint in the model and made it glow.)

Then a choral song starts, softly at first & with the heavy sound of a very large choir. Groups of people appear in the dome, projected images—perhaps ten or a dozen separate groups spaced evenly around the perimeter. At first each group is tiny. But the images repeatedly dissolve and are replaced by larger & larger ones, so you can imagine each group growing closer or (if you prefer) getting pumped up like a balloon. The intent is for all these people to be converging on Democracy. Each group is a coherent set, teachers with books, farmers with tools, miners with lamps on their helmets, architects or engineers with blueprints and so on. When the groups have arrived (or at any rate, when they are as pumped up as they are going to get), shimmering light rises from the horizon to engulf the entire dome. Then it fades & the show is over. After a brief pause it starts again. It lasts just long enough to allow you to make one complete orbit. We came in nearly at the start, but that was by chance—people stream in continuously.

The climactic picture show is intended to illustrate a point that Theme Committee chairman Robert Kohn regards as central, “the

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interdependence of all people, trades and classes in the modern world.” The choir has a thousand voices. The movie screen furnished by the dome is an acre and a quarter large.

Now Democracy itself: It is no “planless jumble of slum and chimney,” says Kohn, but an exquisitely crafted instrument. Today we would—on balance—hardly want to live in such a place. Everything is sparkling new. There is no variety to the buildings and no history. But the high-thirties view is captured revealingly in that “planless jumble of slum and chimney.” Nowadays we find old buildings quaint and edifying. We revamp them and turn them into shopping centers and office space. But in the thirties people *lived* in them, and there was nothing quaint about it. “Old-law tenements” were still standing in New York, buildings without central heat or hot water or bathtubs or (sometimes) fire escapes, where every apartment on the floor shared a bathroom. Cities then didn’t boast about their old buildings. They condemned them and tore them down as fast as they could.

It is essential that we understand Democracy if we are to understand the fair. In the future you would no longer have to live in a city just because you worked in one. You would live in the countryside or in “garden apartments” around the city’s rim. Factory workers would live in green towns just like everybody else. You would drive to work, or to sprawling green parks in the countryside, not on packed city streets but on landscaped highways.

In other words: Democracy’s utopian World of Tomorrow amounts, in essence, to the modern suburbs.

But what is the big deal, we are forced to wonder, about mere *suburbia*? To put it another way, how could 1947 New Yorkers have been launched into ecstatic transports (as indeed they were) by Levittown? The typical lot in that archetypal modern suburb was sixty feet wide by a hundred deep. The typical Cape Cod had a living room, a kitchen and two bedrooms on a concrete

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slab, no basement, an unfinished attic upstairs. The floors were tiled in asphalt.

To understand the passion behind Democracy's utopia, it helps to look at a film called *The City*, which debuted at the fair. *The City* is a propaganda piece—"a hectoring documentary film," one modern study calls it—but it was very much a part of the fair's official world view. "It is believed that an ordinary exhibit of city planning," reports a publicity release, "with drawings and photographs and models of bad tenements, means very little to the average citizen who is not a technician." So a film seemed like a good idea instead. The goal was to show fairgoers the slums that made "decent living impossible for the under-privileged," the evils that "laissez-faire" (the opposite of planning) had inflicted on modern cities. And most important, to show them how to make things better.

The City was produced by the American City Planning Institute. The narration was composed by Lewis Mumford, the brash and sullen music by Aaron Copland. *The City* hates the city. The modern American city, according to this film, is full of noise and fumes and shouts and shrillness and ambulances, drunks, fire trucks stuck in traffic, angry cops. The city streets are hectic and dangerous. The city is a hateful place for children to grow up. The hovels that factory workers inhabit are worse—dark, dirty, primitive, ugly, disastrously unhealthy.

The future, by contrast, is a place where people live in suburban towns—where children romp in green fields, ride their bikes and play softball (softball is a nationwide craze in the thirties) far away from the grind of city traffic, the filth of city gutters, the danger of city railroad yards. In the future "the motor-parkways weave together city and countryside," and people drive to work or the beach on "townless highways" that "go around the town, not through it. Once started, nothing stops you till you're there." The narrator's

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tone has now assumed an odd bite-your-lip sort of cheerfulness, hope against hope.

A newspaper piece about Democracy, based on an interview with chairman Kohn, underlines the same anticity themes and their antidotes. Democracy is no "city of canyons and gasoline fumes, it is one of simple functional buildings—most of them low—all of them surrounded by green vegetation and clean air. A city where no streets actually intersect and, therefore, where no traffic accidents occur." Most important, a city where no one lives. !!



In 1939 Americans yearned for suburbia. After the Second World War they flooded out of the cities. It is true that many factors egged them on. During the war tax rates had risen, and the long-standing mortgage interest deduction had grown in value correspondingly. The Federal Housing Administration of 1934 and the Veterans Administration of 1944 insured mortgages and favored suburbs over cities for new construction. But it is also clear that the public longed for the suburban countryside: for a place where you could own a house, tend your plot, let your children ride their bikes in the streets and hear the jingling of crickets on a summer evening. Where you could live and yet still work in the city, commuting over crowded but decent highways. Where you could own a backyard and yet still find schools and shops that the 1930s would have described (intending a compliment) as more urban than small-town in character. Those austere 1947 Levittown houses had central heating and telephones, stoves, refrigerators and washing machines. They had front yards and backyards. People wanted them. Of course there were suburbs before the war, but after the war they exploded. People flocked from the cities in

such a rush that in 1956, Robert Moses felt obliged to assert "I do not believe that the metropolis is obsolete."

Promise made, promise kept: We have largely achieved Democracy's utopia. We have suburbs that are not only for shopkeepers, professionals, businessmen and the wealthy, but also for factory workers and secretaries, Koreans, blacks and Jews. The 1970 census was the first in which suburbia was more populous than the nation's cities or rural areas. (Also around 1970, middle-class blacks began moving to the suburbs in significant numbers. Before then they had been excluded, informally or—as in Levittown before the mid-sixties, for example—by explicit contractual stipulation.)

Of course, there is much we have *not* achieved of Democracy's vision. Democracy was "a perfectly integrated garden city of tomorrow." In 1902 the Englishman Ebenezer Howard had published a book by that name, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. "Town and country must be married, and out of this union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilization." By 1939 several American towns directly embodied Howard's ideas. Radburn, New Jersey, was one. It was planned in the late 1920s. Its houses were grouped closely together, each bordering one street for vehicles and another just for foot traffic. "The motor highway surrounding the whole super-block sends its tributary streets inward toward, but not to, the park core . . . The central park core and its rimming footway send out arms to the boundary." Land was held in common. Radburn had its own school and library, year-round programs for children and an endless list of earnest discussion groups. *The City* illustrated its suburban ideal with pictures of another planned town—Greenbelt, Maryland—that was much like Radburn.

Planning was sacred to the Democracy world view, and few of our suburbs are planned (although planned towns are making a comeback). The city proper, in the Democracy view, was a place where no one lived. But our cities remain moderately robust living

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places; and obviously the slums are still with us (although nowadays the working class is rarely obliged to live in them). People commute today not only between the suburb and the city, but increasingly between one suburb and another. But that development would have come as no surprise: "The City of Tomorrow will be inspired by the automobile," the fair's literature explains. "Communities will spread outward in breadth, rather than grow upward in the congested fashion of the city of today."

Like the Futurama, Democracy makes many erroneous predictions. Suburban homes, for example, are built on hills or riverbanks "so as not to utilize the land designed to produce the fresh food for Democracy." "Intoxicated drivers will be rare because of the gradual education of the human race to the dangers of mixing alcohol and automobiles into a death cocktail." (Cocktails were big in 1939.) Robert Moses for one was skeptical about the whole city-of-the-future idea—the City of Tomorrow, he wrote, would be a spiffed-up City of Today, not some brand-new Democracy-style concoction.

Mulling over the many important aspects of Democracy's vision we have not achieved or have simply rejected, it is easy to forget that we *have* realized the heart of it. We take the "marriage of town and country" for granted, and when 1939 gets excited about it, we shrug our shoulders. It's not utopia, we point out, it's just suburbia.

It looks a lot like utopia to us, says 1939. Utopia is a place where, for vast numbers of people, life all in all is pretty good.

Many people still can't afford the suburbs; but please let's contemplate, just for a moment, the vast numbers who can. Their lives are not sheer heaven on earth. By and large they are merely comfortable.

But that is what we longed for, says 1939, and you have got it. Promise made, promise kept.

The 1939 public in orbit round Democracy is a community

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of faith circling a shrine. All that faith and fervor paid off, and the community of the faithful emerged, after the war, into the promised land that had been foretold. But in the promised land there were no more shrines to circle, and no more pilgrimages. When you live in utopia you can't yearn for utopia anymore, and the community of faith is dead.



Democracy's central district is called "Centerton," and the surrounding towns are either "Pleasantvilles" or "Millvilles," the Pleasantvilles being entirely residential. The straightforward roll-up-our-sleeves, solve-the-problem, make-it-work *seriousness* of the high thirties echoes still in those artless names. The poetry is in their plainness.

The Perisphere had a staff of more than a hundred people to manage its complex machinery. Despite their best efforts it broke down every once in a while. Naturally it broke down when E. B. White visited—"when I finally presented myself there at the base of the white phallus, face to face with the girl in the booth behind the glass window with the small round hole." It turned out there would be a wait of several minutes. "Just some minor difficulty in the Perisphere," the guard explained. "Is there anything in there to scare you?" a lady asks. "No, Madam," the guard reassures her.