

Down the Rabbit Holes of World Expos

CHARLES PAPPAS: “In Chicago, at the end of the 19th century, amid the smoke of industry and the clatter of trains, there lived two men. Both handsome, both blue-eyed, and both unusually adept at their chosen skills.

Each embodied an element of the great dynamic that characterized the rush of America towards the 20th century. One was an architect — the builder of many of America's most important structures, among them the Flatiron Building in New York and Union Station in Washington DC. The other... was a murderer.

One of the most prolific in history and harbinger of an American archetype: the urban serial killer.

Although the two never met, at least not formally, their fates were linked by a single magical event. One largely fallen from modern recollection but that, in its time, was considered to possess a transformative power nearly equal to that of the Civil War.”

CHARLES PAPPAS: I wish I had written that..

NOON SALIH: American author Erik Larson wrote that, actually. It’s the opening note of his 2003 non-fiction novel, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*. This spooky, based-on-true-events

story is set at the 1893 World's Columbian Expo in Chicago. And, today, it's being adapted into a TV show produced by Leonardo DiCaprio and Martin Scorsese. So you can say it's a pretty popular book about World Expos.

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NOON SALIH: Now, the person who just did that very dramatic reading should sound familiar if you've been listening to Inside Expo. He's an expert on World Expos, their history, and their impact. He's a walking, talking Expo encyclopedia. He's the self-proclaimed "Captain Ahab" of World Expos.

CHARLES PAPPAS: I'm Charles Pappas. I am a senior writer with EXHIBITOR Magazine in the United States. We cover the exhibition industry and also World Expos, of course, since it's the largest form of an exhibition. I'm also the author of a history on World Expos called Flying Cars, Zombie Dogs, and Robot Overlords. And it's a look at how World Expos shaped history and also individual lives.

If a century from now, I wanted someone to look back and know who I was... I would say, "I'm the guy who goes down all the rabbit holes of World Expos and never came back."

NOON SALIH: In this episode, I give the mic to Charles to tell us several little stories that prove how World Expos not only influence pop culture, but make it.

CHARLES PAPPAS: Oh, let's go. Let's do it. Let's do it.

NOON SALIH: I'm Noon Salih, and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

[INTRO STING]

NOON SALIH: Pop culture is one of those things that doesn't quite have a definition.

CHARLES PAPPAS: In some ways, I think it's morphed over the years, but today, I would refer to it as the culture that we all share generally through entertainment.

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CHARLES PAPPAS: From The Simpsons to Beyoncé to novelists to movies. You know, it's so cross-cultural. And Expos, throughout the years, have often kick-started that. And, and for that, I would almost go back to 1889, to the Expo in Paris when the Eiffel Tower debuted. I would say, in many ways, that was one of the greatest of all for entering pop culture.

Even though in some ways, to be honest, 1851 — the very first one — introduced one of the strangest oddities of pop culture I can think of. Anthropological taxidermy. Curious? Curious about what that is?

MUSIC

There were approximately 14 taxidermists — perhaps more — at the 1851 Expo. And the most renowned was a German named Hermann Ploucquet. He arranged creatures like hedgehogs to be ice skating, or kittens to be serenading piglets.

They were elaborate. They were lifelike. And the reason they took off in popular culture was... Queen Victoria loved them. Called them “really marvelous.” When she gave that endorsement, it became a thing among people — it took off.

And here's its effect. A few weeks ago, over new years, I was in New Orleans, and I was going down Magazine Street, somewhere around the 2200 block. And I stopped at this one store that had some oddities and curiosities. And sure enough, they had anthropological taxidermy featured in one part of it. And I'm looking at this and thinking...

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CHARLES PAPPAS: “A hundred and seventy years later, a world away. That Expo has an effect in the corner of this one shop.” But that intrigued me so much to see the ripple effect. And of course, how many would pass by and see it and not know its origins — not know why is this thing here, now? You wouldn't think twice about it, but you can go back to 1851, the Crystal Palace, the first exhibition, and good old Queen Victoria.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: Chicago, 1893, where the novel from the beginning of our episode — *The Devil in the White City* — is set. Everything in this book happened in real life.

CHARLES PAPPAS: The SparkNotes summary — it's funny. You have Daniel Burnham, the architect of the Flatiron Building and many of the classical buildings of the style used for the 1893 Expo, which actually were kind of a transient form of hemp and plaster called staff.

And then you have Holmes. You have the secretive killer who went by many names, that may or may not have been his real name — who really knows? He was caught later on after the Expo, unfortunately not at the Expo.

So he created a kind of boarding house and it drew in women, of course. Single women. And he preyed on them. But he constructed the house to have a place to dispose of the bodies — to throw them down chutes, to burn them, to dip them in acid, to take care of the remains. It's almost a movie version of villainy because, you think, how could someone be this elaborate? But he apparently may have killed as many as 200 people. And when you think about it, if someone travels there, you know, they don't really leave a trail, they don't leave a digital trail in 1893. They don't leave much of any kind of trail for that matter. So disappearing would be very easy.

Remember, World Fairs were a way of showing us at our best, us at what we could produce. And it was synonymous with progress. So you're seeing these fairs as the culmination of humankind at that point, that's really kind of the ideology behind it — that we're moving forward. It's celebrating our ingenuity and our industry and our ability to bring these products to people, but [that] were more than products. They're a way of saying, "Life is so much better now." Hence, if you will, the incongruity of a serial killer, you know, working inside that wonderfulness.

NOON SALIH: Paris, 1937.

CHARLES PAPPAS: Guernica. Picasso's masterpiece, I think, is rooted in Expos but in more ways than people know, because part of it has to do with a chip on his shoulder. So let's wind back time. Go back to 1900.

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Picasso is at the 1900 Expo in Paris. He's covering it for an art magazine in Barcelona. But he also has a painting there, believe it or not. It's called Lost Moments. And I would call it more traditional, in that it shows a woman on her deathbed. And, you know, it's a good painting. It was in the Spanish section of the Grand Palais. It's actually very talented, but they hung it in a high corner. You're never going to be able to see it straight on. That incensed him.

So now, he's going through Cubism, his Blue Period, his Rose Period.

Come 1937, he's offered a chance to do a painting for the Expo in Paris. So again, here he is fueled by... a chip on his shoulder. Because he wasn't that big then. He couldn't walk around and go, "Do you know who I am?" But now he could. So he's given a chance. And actually, in January of 1937, he was given a chance to do this again for what would be the Spanish Republic, which of course was in a fight to the death with the fascist forces of Franco.

So, he's actually stuck. He actually has painter's block, I guess. This is going to make him. But he still has nothing. Well, if you will, inspiration came to him and it wasn't in the form of a lovely muse. It was in the form of an atrocity. In April, Italian and German forces bomb for Franco, the Basque city of Guernica. It's a horrible tragedy. At least 200 people there died. That inspires him.

He creates this monochrome masterpiece that actually, to me, looks like you gathered horses, bulls, women, and children in a room, and then threw a hand grenade in. Because it's just fragmented bodies, if you will, and terror. It's about,

what? Four by eight meters. Massive. Overwhelming. And it becomes, in my viewpoint, the greatest anti-war work since Goya's Disasters of War series. In fact, maybe even the greatest of all — and that's saying something.

NOON SALIH: New York City, 1964 to 1965. This World's Fair was inspired by the World Expo, and some of you might remember the Unisphere as the globe-like structure that gets destroyed in the 1997 film, Men in Black.

CHARLES PAPPAS: And the Unisphere was this marvelous kind of minimalist world, if you will. They used to call it the "globe's largest globe." It was huge. It was dramatic. But beautiful, really. Because I was there as a nine-year-old kid in 1965, and one of the best things about it was that the jet pack — the rocket man would sometimes course around it.

NOON SALIH: Fun fact: that very same jetpack is the driving plotpoint in the 2015 Disney movie, Tomorrowland. It's also relevant at Expo 2020 Dubai, with Mission: Human Flight, which — you guessed it — wants to achieve 100 percent autonomous human flight.

Okay, back to 1965.

CHARLES PAPPAS: Bell Aerospace Systems had actually developed this. And they had this guy who was a Korean war pilot. So he was proficient in flying, but it was very difficult to handle. Yet, what he could do is, for a grand total of 21 seconds, he could fly around the fairgrounds, and again, around the Unisphere with fuel made of a pressurized hydrogen peroxide. He could maneuver it, though it was very, very difficult. And then he would sometimes — and you would love this — he would

sometimes control it so perfectly. He would come down and land in the arms of the Broadway star Chita Rivera. So of course, we all thought, where's my jetpack?

And I mean, really, if you see how people drive, would you really trust millions with jetpacks? I don't think so, but the dream was there. The wonder was there. You know, hey, it goes back to Icarus, some feathers, and some wax, right? We're gonna fly if we can. Well, this spoke to that, and it's always been a staple of, "Is this coming and there's always a kind of next year, next year, next year..."

NOON SALIH: Besides the Unisphere, World Expos are the reason we have so many iconic buildings that define the cities in which they are located. The Eiffel Tower and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the Atomium in Brussels, the Space Needle in Seattle. But World Expos are also the inspiration behind... the "happiest place on Earth."

CHARLES PAPPAS: Well, you go back to 1893. And again, sometimes I wonder about these guys just walking the grounds. Well, Walt Disney's father worked on that. And so Disney kind of was raised with that, with his father talking about the 1893 Expo. Disney himself went to the 1939 one in New York. And again, he's getting these ideas, right?

So he eventually starts incorporating those ideas for Disneyland, and then later on Disney World.

NOON SALIH: Some of these ideas which originated at the World's Fair include animatronics in rides and the designs for the EPCOT theme park and Tomorrowland. Also at the '64-65 World's Fair was the Disney-designed UNICEF Pavilion, where the boat ride "It's a Small World" first premiered.

Disney also designed the Ford Motor Company Pavilion, which brought a pretty cool car and pretty terrifying creatures into pop culture... at the same time.

CHARLES PAPPAS: This was really unusual. You went up an escalator, and Ford put out 150 convertibles of all their most popular cars, including 12 Mustangs, which were being introduced. They were the hot new car.

It is a massive hit. You go up that escalator, and I had a teenage sister at that time, so you made a beeline for the Mustang because of course you had to sit in the Mustang if you're a teenager. And when you went around in the Mustang, you went around this kind of diorama of human history — except it's with life-sized dinosaurs battling each other.

So you have a T-Rex and a Triceratops in the stereotype fight to the death. And they're life-size. You've seen the giant figures in the Mobility Pavilion — the three explorers, including Ibn Battuta? Well, it was just like that except these creatures are fighting it out.

It was kind of fantastic to see and for a nine-year-old? This is Jurassic Park, but it looks real because it's right in front of you. So you even have that aspect of popularizing dinosaurs, which 40-50 years later, still enters in popular culture. Again, why did it get that grip on you? Because of Expos. It started with Expos.

NOON SALIH: You might remember this segment from our very first episode...

ARCHIVAL RECORDING

From a previous interview with Charles Pappas

NOON SALIH: We asked Charles - in a minute or less - to take us through a kind of laundry list of inventions that we now take for granted, but which actually originated at a world Expo.

CHARLES PAPPAS: Okay. 1, 2, 3, go! If you ever zipped up a piece of clothing. If you ever use a touch screen. If you ever rode an elevator or an escalator. If you ever use a computer itself. If you ever use a telephone. If you ever listened to recorded music. If you ever paid for gasoline at the pump. If you ever put on a nylon. If you ever had an x-ray. You've done something that was introduced at or hit the tipping point of popularity at an Expo.

Back to the current interview with Charles Pappas:

NOON SALIH: But wait, there's more.

CHARLES PAPPAS: You go to 1867 in Paris. And you have this demonstration of primitive diving suits. Two guys in what's essentially a very large aquarium showing you prototypes of diving suits. And at the same show, at the same Expo, you have a model submarine. There's this guy walking through; he's looking at it and he's kind of taking these lessons home with him. So, this is 1867. Five years later, he writes *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*. Jules Verne.

And at the same fair, you had Strauss who wrote the orchestral version of [The] Blue Danube. It took off — it was a wildfire. And ever since then, he became “The Waltz King.” That was his claim to fame. That's what he's known for. It was because he did that at Expos.

MUSIC

And you know, 1893 did something else. So you had this almost Disneyland-size, literally Disneyland-size site, where you put up all these fantastic white buildings so that it was named “The White City” and it was gleaming. It was pristine. It was clean. And you have a guy walking through it. Yes, L. Frank Baum. And he's looking at all these things, taking it all in. And then he leaves and he goes and he writes *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. He took the White City and turned it into Oz, the Emerald City. But of course, it struck him as a magical urban environment. A place where the odd happens, the wonderful is the norm.

You even have Isaac Asimov, 1939 World's Fair in New York. They held the first science-fiction convention ever then. And of course, they're held all over the world now, right? But he was there with Ray Bradbury. Can you imagine that? These two — they were kids! They were kids! And seeing Elektro the robot there inspired Asimov to write *Strange Playfellow*, which he later renamed Robbie and then became the basis, kind of the first block if you will, in this whole foundation of *The Robot Chronicles*.

It then had a ripple effect with all of science-fiction, all of the ideas about robots. All that comes from an Expo. It just kind of kickstarts so much of what we know.

NOON SALIH: Dubai, 2021 to 2022.

CHARLES PAPPAS: I took a walk around here yesterday and in my head, I gave myself the challenge, the question: What here will be in popular culture 20 years from now? So I really gave that some thought. Now, let me back up a moment. Look at the Eiffel Tower. Delaunay painted it. Chagall painted it. Henri Rivière did his famous 36 views of it during its construction. It's been featured in Truffaut's [The] 400 Blows. Scorsese did it in *Hugo*. It's been in the video game, *Call of Duty*,

right? The Beatles mentioned it in "I am the Walrus." It's been everywhere. It's seeped into popular culture. We cannot extract it. Right? So I thought, what has the best chance of it? Oh, in fact, it's — the Eiffel Tower — even been in *The Living Daylights*, a James Bond movie. So now you're really mixing pop cult, right?

And I thought there's two things here. One is [Santiago] Calatrava's design for the UAE Pavilion.

It's biomimicry. A falcon. The wings, 28, of which can move up and down to generate electricity. It generates public pride. It is radical looking and it will live on after the Expo is over. That stands a very good chance of entering into popular culture.

But I think the number one is the Al Wasl Plaza with the dome.

For a couple of reasons. The dome is the largest projection surface, 360 degree projection surface with 250 Christie projectors. I mean, it's massive, it's overpowering. And you've got the statistics you can remember about it.

It weighs as much as 25 blue whales. You could fit the Leaning Tower of Pisa in it. It is so big. I see this as becoming a public plaza. People will use it for a variety of events. So thousands, if not millions over time, will have use for it and be familiar with it. And of course, can you think of a better backdrop for some movies? It's dramatic. It's beautiful, especially at night. I think this will winnow its way into many TV shows, many movies, live streaming here and there. And I think that stands the best chance of entering into popular culture.

If I had to bet money, I'd put my money on that.

The connection between Expos and pop culture is important, not just because it might appear on an episode of *The Simpsons*, like when it did the Knoxville Energy Expo from 1982 — what was the episode? “Bart on the Road.” Where actually Knoxville and the Expo site looks like a dystopia, which, by the way, folks, it is not. It still has a great legacy left over with a beautiful park and a lovely structure, the Sunsphere.

But it's important, I think, because it communicates ideas. And, not to put too fine a point on it, but it communicates it in a viral manner. That is, it can spread easily and it can get into our heads — like that song, “It's a Small World After All” — and you won't be able to get it out of your head afterwards. But it's important because you accept it as kind of — not only a norm, but a pleasant norm. Something we aspire to. Something we'd like to have.

So, yes, if you popularize that in movies, books, anime, what have you, you've won half the war, because now this is what people accept. I really hold in the belief that Expos can create that critical mass, that tipping point, often through pop culture.

And it's one of our last best hopes to move quickly. And that's the key to move quickly because enough people have to walk away saying, “This is what we want. This is what we need”.

NOON SALIH: Inside Expo takes you behind the scenes at Expo 2020 Dubai, sharing our stories and others across the 170-year history of this global event. Learn more by visiting [VirtualExpoDubai.com](https://virtualexpodubai.com).

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