

A Chance for City to Celebrate, Educate

Guest editorial by Richard Campanella, published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, May 13, 2009

The year 2009 marks the 125th and 25th anniversaries of New Orleans' two world's fairs, the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition of 1884-1885 and the Louisiana World Exposition of 1984. It also puts us within a decade of our city's tricentennial.

Both our fairs struggled financially, but succeeded in presenting city culture to the world and in pushing urban development in the right direction. The 1884 event helped instigate the formation of Tulane and Loyola university campuses, the landscaping of Audubon park and zoo, and the construction of beautiful residential neighborhoods nearby. The 1984 event sparked the revitalization of a nameless post-industrial zone into today's vibrant Warehouse District, now home to the lion's share of our convention industry.

The era of the traditional world's fair is now passed. Their role in unveiling new technologies and interpreting culture has been overtaken by globalization, instantaneous telecommunications, and an ever-growing list of competing travel options. Their decline since the late 20th century, however, has coincided with the rise of smaller and more focused festivals and expositions. Among them are Tennessee's Bonnaroo festival, Cannes' and Park City's film festivals, our own JazzFest and recent Prospect-1 art biennial, Spain's Expo 2008 (which featured water and sustainable-development themes), and Shanghai's upcoming Expo 2010, themed to "Better City, Better Life."

The three-hundred anniversary of the foundation of New Orleans is less than nine years away. In a region famous for its festivals, such a major milestone seems worthy of an extended event, rather than a weekend ceremony like that of the Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial in 2003. A tricentennial event might also offer an opportunity to present to the world the recovered and stabilized city we all hope emerges from this post-catastrophe era. The 1884 world's fair aimed, in part, to demonstrate the city's rebound after the Civil War.

Perhaps, in considering how New Orleans might mark its birthday, we can cherry-pick what worked about the old world's fairs and what works in today's festivals, avoid what failed, and devise a plan for the right-sized event that minimizes the problems seen in 1884 and 1984. Strategically siting the event might bear the added benefit of drawing new investment into struggling areas. Sections of the Lafitte Corridor in Treme / Fifth Ward, which are open, spacious, accessible, historic, and in need of attention, come to mind.

While the literal establishment of New Orleans occurred in spring 1718, the launching of the city, from its initial charter to its designation as capital, spanned from 1717 to 1722. This five-year window allows planners to consider a series of periodic events with interrelated themes, thus increasing overall diversity while decreasing fixed costs and risk.

Now might be the right time to start considering how New Orleans marks its 2018 tricentennial. Remembering the 1884 and 1984 world's fairs, with all their successes and failures, might be a good way to start.

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