

## AMERICA'S SOFT SELL

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### BRUSSELS

The American Pavilion at the World's Fair here is officially controversial. President Eisenhower, described as "very irritated" at the bad notices our exhibition has received, dispatched George V. Allen, Director of the United States Information Agency, to Brussels to give him a personal report. The President's action made the adverse opinions expressed by many writers and private citizens returning from the fair a subject of official inquiry.

This controversy over our representation here has its ironic aspects. While everyone who visits the fair agrees there is much to criticize, little agreement exists on the basis for the criticism. Many vociferous attacks have been launched from assumptions that are questionable or even inconsistent.

An example of the latter type of criticism, heard mostly from European intellectuals, is a kind of "damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't approach. Take our pavilion itself. The American Pavilion is one of the loveliest buildings at the fair, a fact which one British reporter found a "surprise." Edward D. Stone, the architect, designed a large circular structure which embodies sweep, lightness and grace. Approaching the main entrance, the visitor passes through a small grove of apple trees, alongside a pool, in which a fountain splashes over a Calder sculptured abstraction. Inside, the center area is given over to another pool, around which several tall willow trees are growing, incorporated into the building at the request of King Baudoin who wanted them left standing on their own sites. The roof, draped with a bronze metallic mesh, is open at the center just above the pool. The whole building breathes an airy spaciousness and freedom.

Commenting on our pavilion, however, an intelligent Swiss business executive told me the other day that while he himself appreciated the warm, human qualities of our display, he very much feared that the masses were more impressed by the muscle-flexing vulgarity of the Soviet exhibition, which he, of course, deplored. Less tactfully, a Belgian journalist seemed amused by our pavilion's efforts to suggest the presence of taste, let alone of culture, in the United States. He implied that we should have held

to the path we know best, production efficiency, hard sell, and the ostentatious display of material possessions.

In effect, both gentlemen, for different reasons, felt that we should have competed directly with the heavy Soviet emphasis on technological achievement and material progress; the Swiss out of concern for how the masses were responding, the Belgian out of doubt that we could successfully project any other image of ourselves.

Suppose, I asked, our pavilion's planners had shipped to Brussels a ranch house stuffed with luxury goods, plus a Detroit assembly line complete with workers and several thousand tons of heavy machinery, and—since our pavilion for all its beauty is unsuitable for displaying such items—housed them all in a mammoth cattle barn. Both observers admitted the display would have fitted the all too common view of America as a nation of boorish materialists. Since neither found much virtue in the fact that our pavilion, whatever its demerits, avoided this picture, one wonders what we could have done, if anything, to please them.

The ranch house and assembly line, however, would certainly have pleased a lot of American visitors here. Their complaints, more angry than any from Europeans, focus almost entirely upon the competitive battle with the Russians. To them, the grandiloquently-named Brussels Universal and International Exposition, 1958, is an awfully serious business. Hard by the American Pavilion, separated only, ironically enough, by the Arab States exhibition, is the Soviet Pavilion. Crowds stream out of one and into the other. The comparisons these crowds are making, the weighing and balancing they are doing, has assumed great importance to these critics. After a tour of the Soviet Pavilion, they seem greatly dissatisfied with our own. The unidentified businessman whose letter about the Fair goaded President Eisenhower into launching Mr. Allen stated firmly that the Soviet Pavilion presented "... all of those things I expected to see in the American exhibit."

What troubles these visitors, I think, was aptly put by an American editor acquaintance. "The Soviet display," he remarked during lunch at the Russian restaurant, "is *sérieuse*, in the special French sense of that word. The U.S. Pavilion is decidedly not "*sérieuse*."

Almost everything in the Soviet Pavilion adds to an effect of ponderous significance. The building itself, an enormous opaque glass rectangle, manages to look massively important and official. Inside, the eye is met by what appears to be several acres of

heavy machinery, architectural and agricultural displays, large-scale models of hydro-electric power stations, steel mills and other exhibits of capital equipment, the kind of displays that by their very nature have to be taken very seriously indeed. Visitors listen attentively to guides explaining the scope of some piece of machinery or quoting some impressive statistic, and nod their heads gravely. On opposite walls just inside are two of those hideous people's art murals depicting strongly-muscled young men and women, joyfully on the march into the soft-hued socialist future.

The Russians are pushing hard the points they want to make. These points are not particularly subtle. Everywhere signs proclaim that the Soviet Union desires peace, that the aim of Soviet foreign policy is a peaceful cooperation among nations. The center of the ground floor is taken up, not surprisingly, by models of Sputniks I and II, along with duplicates of the various measuring instruments sent aloft. My guide said they would be joined by a replica of Sputnik III within a few weeks. A pamphlet available for the taking at this exhibit points out that "capitalist America took over 150 years to reach the summits of technological progress. We have done so in 40 years . . ." and adds, "U. S. scientists are now declaring for all to hear that in the field of science, the U.S.S.R. has already outstripped the United States."

Near the Sputniks are specimens of four Russian automobiles, two luxury models, the new ZIL III and the Cheika, and two small, economy cars. Like cars at any fair, they attract quite a crowd. Though the small models were rather trim, the large cars seemed designed to prove that the United States has no monopoly on flashy, oversized, chrome-laden vehicles.

Moving on through the pavilion, past the automated milling machine, the gear-cutting machine (awarded the Lenin Prize), the automated lathe, and the steel cutting machine, one climbs with some relief to the balcony where a profusion of consumer goods are on view, plus exhibits of Soviet achievements in various cultural activities. These complement the industrial displays below. With them the pavilion adds up to a complete package, or so the visitor is asked to believe, of life in the Soviet Union today. Its import is unmistakably clear: the Soviet Union is moving ahead on all fronts, technocracy, science, the arts, providing abundantly for the material and spiritual needs of its people.

When the visitor, mentally staggering under the size and weight of the Soviet display, turns to the American Pavilion, he may find it disappointingly,

even frivolously, light. Certainly, its impact is nowhere nearly the same. Except for a huge section cut from a Redwood tree, the display, like the pavilion itself, avoids any feeling of massiveness. It holds no heavy industrial machinery—only an electronic computer and an atomic reactor. Instead, on entering, the visitor picks his way through a display called "The Face of America" . . . ("Bits and pieces of Americana," reads the press release): a tumbleweed, old presidential campaign buttons, automobile license plates, a 1903 Ford car—the whole designed to suggest something of the quality of American life.

Emerging into the center area, the visitor may join a large crowd watching models making their way down a flight of stairs from the balcony to a platform in the pool. These periodic fashion shows offer foreign visitors a chance to see what Americans are wearing. Many sophisticated Europeans, whose ideas of fashion are derived from Parisian couturiers, find them silly. A French writer objected that the models are not first-rate, that the shows lack real *chic*. People seem to find them worth watching, however, if only because pretty girls always attract attention—an example of "mass appeal" which these same Europeans charge our pavilion lacks.

One exhibit in our pavilion was placed there at the suggestion of the President. This consists of several voting booths where visitors, most of whom are unfamiliar with voting machines, are shown how to pull down the levers in favor of their favorite American movie stars, political figures or authors. A listing is posted of the results each week, and I noticed Mark Twain stood at the head of the authors category, followed by Hemingway, Faulkner and Henry James.

The biggest crowds in our pavilion are lined up in front of Circarama, a small circular theater in which, by means of a new process worked out by Walt Disney, a motion picture travelogue of the United States, in color, is projected around the walls in a complete circle while the viewers stand in the center. The realistic effects are clever and evidently delight some visitors. The film itself, though uneven, conveys some feeling for the size and variety of our country, which never fail to astonish Europeans.

One area where our representation here more nearly duplicates the Soviet effort is the performing arts program, a series of shows and concerts staged in our handsome twelve hundred-seat theater adjoining the pavilion. After an indifferent response to our first offering, ineptly enough, the movie *South Pacific*, the arrival of Benny Goodman and his orchestra generated some real excitement. American jazz music, as is generally known, is highly popular in Europe, and Goodman's reputation here is large. After

a series of successful concerts in the theater, Goodman ended his tour with an outdoor evening performance in Brussels' seventeenth-century Grande Place, the most charming part of the city. As the ancient buildings reverberated to the strains of "Sing, Sing, Sing" and other Goodman favorites, a large audience whistled and cheered as lustily as any mob of teen-agers at the Paramount. The program will continue with a roster of singers, dancers and orchestras, including the world premiere of Gian-Carlo Menotti's opera *Maria Golovin*.

None of this overwhelms anyone, of course, nor, clearly, was it intended to. Just as the pavilion itself raises, rather than oppresses, one's spirits, the exhibits mostly strive to establish a mood of human activity, of people as individuals rather than factory workers or even good citizens of the State. This emphasis on what may be loosely called culture follows along with the over-all theme of the Fair, whereas the Russian trade-fair approach violates the rules.

"Sour grapes," say some severe American critics who question this whole concept. They argue that, rules or no rules, we should have come to Brussels with a display matching the Russians nut for nut, bolt for bolt.

This eagerness to compare sinews with the Russians is somewhat late. In fact, it has been academic for several months. We lost the battle of brawn when the news that the Russians were spending upwards of fifty million dollars on their pavilion arrived around the first of the year after Congress had slashed away at the modest fifteen million budget our State Department requested. The U. S. Commission to the Fair had to turn to private industry for hand-outs of money and products. Many large firms refused outright to participate. Others responded with dribs and drabs. A few were generous. The Ford Motor Company, for example, donated \$200,000 to pay for Circarama and Westinghouse Broadcasting paid \$85,000 for the Benny Goodman tour. But none of this was adequate to mount a pavilion offensive on anything like the scale the Russians launched.

Apart from the lack of real public or private support for an all-out effort at Brussels, it is disturbing to find that many American tourists here who see the Soviet Pavilion as the model for what we should have unveiled actually dislike what is best about our own pavilion. A prominent decorative element of our pavilion, for example, are some delightfully witty murals by Saul Steinberg. These are under attack for being too sophisticated for mass appeal. The unknown businessman quoted earlier certainly found them so. They depicted, he wrote, "such beauties as the girl with two eyes on one side of her head, the tipsy modern sipping her highball, etc." More to his

taste were the Russian murals "showing happy people playing and working together . . ."

Oddly enough, Ilya Ehrenberg apologized to reporters here for just these very murals. Aside from demonstrating once again that good and bad taste do not recognize national boundaries, any occasion on which a Russian, rather than an embarrassed American, issues apologies for his country's official art is a refreshing change. The Russian murals probably do have greater "mass appeal." But some people here are glad the Russians have them and we have Steinberg.

Given the concepts behind our pavilion, no doubt a kind of know-nothing attack could have been expected. What is really unfortunate is that the people responsible for the pavilion did not defend themselves by carrying out their aims more successfully. Where our pavilion fails—and it is no small failure—is not in concept but in execution. Many of the exhibits cry out for a more dramatic presentation. Our pavilion's greatest deficiency is its diffuseness.

Trying to find some reasonable ground from which to judge the tumult and shouting over American-Soviet competition here, one may suggest without being frivolous that with all the uproar many people have become far too excited about the Fair and its importance in the Cold War. The "masses" streaming through the Fair grounds are in a holiday mood and show little awareness of the battle raging for their allegiance.

The Soviet Union has made substantial achievements. It came to Brussels determined to overwhelm people with what it has accomplished. Its pavilion exudes that same aggressive, almost boastful, self-confidence which Khrushchev displays on certain public occasions. As with Khrushchev, many people unquestionably find this impressive. It is meant to impress.

Our pavilion is meant to divert, to arouse pleasant feelings about the United States and its people. Without venturing to speak, as some have done, for the "masses," it must be true that many visitors are repelled by much of the Soviet Pavilion and find ours a welcome change.

One day, while walking through our pavilion, I opened a door and walked into an attractively appointed air-conditioned room where a dozen or so people were seated, listening to music from one of a number of hi-fi phonographs. This music room is part of our exhibit, kept open for people who just want to sit and listen. Such people are certainly not in the majority or of the "masses," but those I saw looked cool, comfortable and quite pleased.