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Shanghai'd, or the USA Pavilion as a Corporate Theme Park [1]

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Let's begin with the positive: the United States is present at the World Expo in Shanghai. The Secretary of State deserves praise for making this possible, by launching an eleventh hour fundraising drive, after the previous administration had done virtually nothing (besides rejecting a proposal that included Frank Gehry as architect). The Chinese cared enough about the U.S. presence to have contributed both public and private funds to guarantee that the U.S. showed up for Expo Shanghai 2010.

In this age of globalization and social networking, a World Expo might seem a quaint throwback to a bygone era. But for many countries, including, notably, China, it offers a global platform to present strengths and salient characteristics to the world. For example, Japan, known for its technology, powers its "green" pavilion partly from the footsteps of visitors who are treated to violin-playing robots, a single-person prototype car by Toyota, as well as a historical exhibition on Japan's envoys to China. In its pavilion, Indonesia highlights cultural diversity; the United Arab Emirates emphasizes sustainability, a key focus of the country, with a recyclable dune shaped pavilion. Almost without exception the pavilions dazzle with innovative architecture, and with unusual shapes, colors, and lighting, as in the case of the United Kingdom's pavilion-- a futuristic display of 60,000 transparent fiberglass rods with different seeds enclosed at the ends, designed by British artist Thomas Heatherwick.

So far, the Secretary of State's comment, "It's fine," seems to be the highest praise the U.S. Pavilion, with all the design brilliance of a suburban shopping mall, has garnered. In the only positive article we could find, besides the one written by the Secretary General of the Pavilion himself, one of the 160 Chinese speaking "student ambassadors"—a brilliant idea — notes the smiling responses of Chinese visitors to the welcome messages — in Chinese — from famous Americans ranging from Kobe Bryant to President Obama. But the student ambassador Dan Redford also observes that the USA Pavilion lacks anything about "our history, our education system, or our role in global affairs… American democracy, or elements of our past and present that have come to define us as Americans."

If all that is missing, what on earth could the content of the Pavilion be? The main event appears to be a "4-D" film about a girl working with her neighbors to make a vacant city lot into a garden, a theme evidently considered in keeping with the Expo's theme, "Better Cities, Better Life." The ambiguous location has been identified by some as China; at any rate, it is not recognizable as America. But no matter, because the film really is all about the special effects—shaking seats, real mist, — "a sense of immersion for our visitors," according to the Pavilion's website. If this sounds eerily like Disney World, you are right. One of the two people responsible for the design and content of the Pavilion is Nick Winslow, a special effects professional and theme park advisor (the other was Ellen Eliasoph, a partner in the

Beijing branch of a leading American law firm).

Others have delved into the murky background of how these two private citizens with little relevant background or expertise were given free rein to determine the design and content of the Pavilion. We have a question that has not been asked to date: why did the State Department not apply the tried and true approach to corporate sponsorship that museums and performing arts companies have used for years, namely that the fundraisers fundraise, the corporate sponsors sponsor, and the experts execute? When a corporation sponsors a museum exhibition, they do not curate it. When a private funder underwrites a dance, play, or opera, they do not select and perform the work in question. When a government funds an exhibition at the Venice Biennale, the grants officer does not curate it. In each case, a curator/choreographer/artistic producer is hired to make the artistic and cultural decisions. If corporations act as curators and artistic directors as well as funders, it can hardly come as a surprise that the result is… well, corporate.

“A supply storage shed,” “a temporary NASA administrative building,” a “combination Bose Sound System/Air Purifier,” are some of the choice descriptions of the USA Pavilion, designed by Canadian architect Clive Grout. Canadian architect? Were there no architects in the U.S. up to the task? The only explanation we could find is that Grout is a “long-time associate of Winslow.”

Similarly, how could the U.S., arguably the global leader in film, be represented by a “4-D” extravaganza that would be at home at a theme park? If film was the chosen medium, why was a qualified curator not hired to do the programming? There are plenty of curators and experts who could have assembled moving, thrilling, and thought-provoking film selections. Who knows, films that actually touch upon some of the key characteristics of American society and history might have been included. Instead, at a cost of US $23 million the U.S. offers a film on the greening of an unidentifiable location, plus a short with leading Americans—and corporate representatives—talking about how they have added to the well-being of their communities. How to explain this mystery? Once again, it helps to be a friend of Nick Winslow, as was Bob Rogers, CEO of BRC Imagination Arts, the firm hired to coordinate the Pavilion programming.

The sorry tale of no-bid contracts and cronyism is bad enough, but most regrettable, and baffling of all is the implicit decision made from the outset to relegate the design and content—the medium and the message—of the Pavilion to the private sector. It almost appears that the State Department does not take the power of cultural outreach and “soft power” seriously.

At this time of budget constraints, a public expenditure on a World Expo, even one in China, probably could not be justified (even though, it is the largest Expo ever, and will be seen by an estimated 75 million people, and countries such as Japan and Australia have spent $140 million and $75 million respectively on their pavilions). And while it might be a stretch to match the brilliance of past publicly funded exhibitions, notably Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome at the Montreal Expo of 1967, the lamentable form and content of the USA Pavilion could have been avoided if someone had taken this important opportunity for cultural outreach seriously. Creative products number among the U.S.’s top three exports; American architects, filmmakers, writers, artists, dancers, musicians, and actors are global leaders in their fields, yet none were enlisted. The varied dimensions of America’s story are examined in ways entirely consistent with the country that stands for freedom of speech in film, theater, visual arts and other forms of expression, and yet the USA Pavilion says nothing about what

makes America unique.

The Pavilion in Shanghai is just the most visible example of the outsourcing of America's outreach to the world. Northrop Grumman and Boeing no longer vie only for aerospace contracts; they also compete for "smart power" projects in areas from aid to "strategic communication." To some degree this acknowledges budget realities. But it also reflects the continuing diminution of cultural outreach or "soft power" approaches within the State Department. Whether it was cynicism, other priorities, or an active dismissal of the importance of crafting a message for the Pavilion (beyond its mere existence) does not really matter. The result is $61 million dollars spent, and an opportunity lost.

If the U.S. does not take the power of cultural diplomacy and "soft power" seriously enough to invest time and money, there is one superpower that does: China.

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