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Welcome to the U.S. Pavilion: We're Here to Disappoint ^[1]

APDS Blogger: Kenya Davis-Hayes

When I entered the US Pavilion at the 2010 World's Exposition in Shanghai, I anticipated the presentation of the nation's character to its predominately Chinese audience and hoped to deconstruct its message. I wondered what virtues, ideas, personas, landmarks and struggles would, in the brief experience of Expo, encapsulate the entity I have dedicated my career to studying. After entering the Pavilion I stood among over one hundred mostly Chinese tourists fascinated to know more about the United States. US student ambassadors greeted each cohort of tourists in Mandarin, and to my absolute delight, the first of the Pavilion's three videos was charming and human. A camera crew highlighted Americans of all stripes struggling to fluently welcome the Chinese audience in their native language with the phrase "Welcome to the US Pavilion." Their gaffes and errors were real and I respected the racial and ethnic diversity, as well as the regional spread of those selected to participate. From there, I expected the second part to grant depth to a light introduction. Instead, the video discussed corporate innovation all while showcasing the inspiring daydreams of American children. This left me at a loss. American corporations are highly competitive in the area of scientific innovation and in past World's Expositions, this has stood as a highlight within our presentations to the world. But within the US Pavilion in Shanghai, American corporate sponsors seemed to soften their corporate and scientific strides beneath the Crayola-drawings of local school children.

The third video gave me further pause. This 4-D presentation entitled "The Garden" showcased a young girl living in a rather dreary neighborhood with a dream of renovating an abandoned lot into a community garden. Most of her neighbors peered at her efforts to plant a flower in the lot with suspicion and unfortunately, her poor flower was vandalized many times until the neighborhood pitched in to help. The garden was almost finished when it began to rain and all of her adult neighbors scattered for the cover of their homes. The little girl gave up her dream but the next day, the guilt-ridden neighbors had recovered their efforts and the community garden was a success. As an academic, I could not help but deconstruct the cultural messages within the film. Once again, the US Pavilion communicates to its international audience that our initiative stems from the idealism of our children and that many American adults are suspicious, unhelpful and afraid of the rain. Such presentations of the national character within the US Pavilion force me to ask a difficult question..."Is the vapid nature of the US Pavilion a true reflection of the American character in 2010?"

To answer my own question, I think it would be fair to say that while the presentation within the US Pavilion does not reflect the entire character of the nation, it may be chronicled as one of the more careless efforts made by the US at a World's Exposition. Future scholars may indeed assert that the US Pavilion does reflect a trend of special effects replacing substance and reality shows replacing serious narrative. As an American Studies scholar, I believe the

greatest tragedy is its failure to capture the provocative complexity of the American experience. With the Expo theme of “Better City, Better Life” the US Pavilion had limitless opportunities to construct for its audience the American experience through the lens of its cities. Like all great cities of the world, our cities have been sites of progress and pain, the seats of governance and the backdrops for some of our greatest triumphs and tragedies. Before entering the US Pavilion, I expected the Philadelphia of our Constitution, the New York City of our Ellis Island, and the Los Angeles of our Hollywood. I hoped for the realities of our history of labor strife a la Haymarket Square in Chicago and the pain of our Detroit race riots. I also imagined the glory of thousands of Women Suffragists marching down Pennsylvania Ave in Washington DC and the sweetness of the birth of jazz in our jewel of the South, New Orleans. And as the world seeks to green itself, I assumed it would have also included the modern efforts of both private citizens as well as corporations based in cities across the US to contribute to the creation of a better planet even with the help of our...children.

Dr. Kenya Davis-Hayes is the resident US historian at California Baptist University and is seeking a Masters of Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School. Beyond the walls of academia, Dr. Davis-Hayes sits on a number of organizational boards and in 2007 was appointed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to the California Council for the Humanities. She is currently summering in Shanghai and enjoys deconstructing the cultural messages of the world's pavilions at the 2010 World Expo.
