

Reviving the American World's Fair
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Table of Contents:

Introduction -----	3
The United States' Involvement -----	4
The Position of World's Fairs Today -----	7
Benefits of a Modern World's Fair -----	9
Choosing the Right Location -----	11
Theme and Vision -----	13
Funding -----	15
Taking the Weight off Nations -----	17
Challenges & Criticisms -----	18
Expected Outcomes and Long-Term Benefits-----	20
Conclusion -----	22
Sources -----	23

Introduction:

The World's Fair is currently in a very unique position since its first inception. Being first officially held in London in 1851, the event, initially known as "The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations," was made to serve as a showcase for industrial, technological, and artistic progression throughout all corners of the world. This great exhibition spanned from May to October, with 25 countries displaying their novelty. However, national exhibitions had been a looming idea for many years before this. In 1791, Prague held an industrial exhibition during the coronation of Leopold II. Also, in 1798 and 1844, France held national exhibitions as an effort to promote post-revolutionary unity and prowess. Although these examples were largely domestic, they reflected the growing interest in displaying national achievements and helped set the stage for this longstanding tradition.

Overall, World's Fairs can be grouped into three eras: industrialization (1851-1938), cultural exchange (1939-1987), and nation branding (1988-present) (Wong). Since 1931, these events have been run by the Bureau International des Expositions, a French-based intergovernmental organization. In time, many wonders of art and innovation would go on to be introduced at these World's Fairs, such as the telephone, the Eiffel Tower, and even Cherry Coke.

World's Fairs give nations a chance to present innovation, foster international cooperation, and develop economically. We believe their potential is much greater than is currently being shown by their utilization, and it is not just nations that need to be involved. In fact, we stand by the thought that there needs to be a new era of expositions. In this paper, we

will analyze the historical role of World's Fairs, discuss their unique position in the current world, and consider how a contemporary World's Fair can be useful for the U.S.A.

The United States' Involvement:

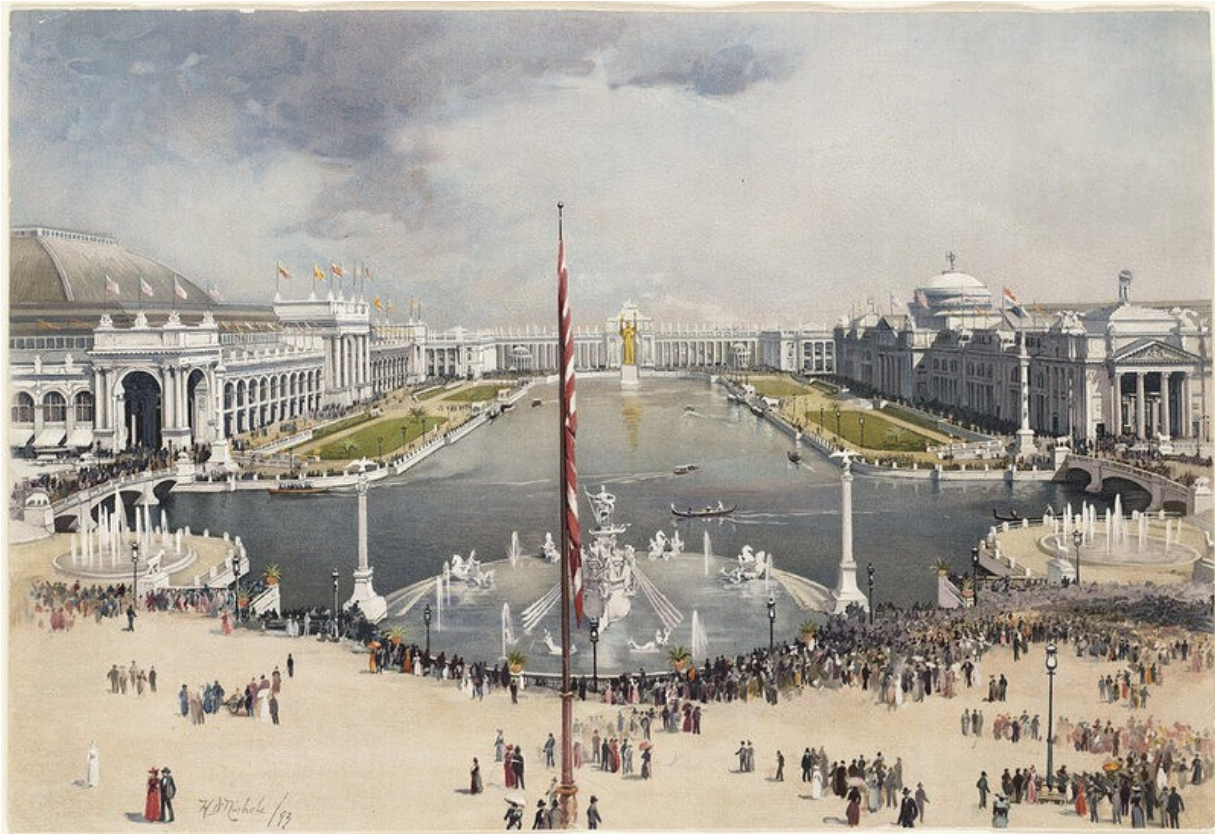


Figure 1. Court of Honor, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893

The first expo held on American turf was in Philadelphia in 1876. It became known as the “Centennial Exhibition” and celebrated the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Additionally, this celebration would showcase how far the U.S. and the world had come since the Revolutionary War. Some of the most notable inventions and

items introduced here were the telephone, the typewriter, the sewing machine, popcorn, and root beer. Also introduced were the arm and torch of the Statue of Liberty, presented by France.

Not only did the U.S. get to show off these physical innovations at the fair, but they were also able to positively alter their image for all the attending countries. Not less than a decade before this event occurred, the Union had won the Civil War and abolished slavery across the states, while also granting African Americans citizenship and the right to vote. Next, the Gilded Age, the major expansion of oil and railroad tycoons, also became prevalent in the American upper classes, heavily altering the U.S. economy. Before this event, many international observers viewed the U.S. as a young, rural, and culturally unrefined nation. This fair, coinciding with the Industrial Revolution, helped show foreign visitors that the U.S. was becoming a major world leader.

Our home country has hosted 30 of these events in their time, with the most recent one being in 1984, located in New Orleans. Generally, each exposition had been used to define a signature landmark in the U.S. For instance, Seattle (1962) introduced the Space Needle and Seattle Center, San Antonio (1968) introduced the Tower of the Americas and the River Walk expansion, and Knoxville (1982) introduced the Sunsphere.

One of the most memorable fairs was held in Chicago (1893), and it transformed the city into a symbol of innovation and progress. Known as the “White City,” the fair featured grand neoclassical buildings, electric lighting, beautiful lagoons, and the world’s first Ferris Wheel, giving visitors a glimpse of what the future could look like. Over 27.5 million people attended the exposition, making it one of the most successful world fairs of the nineteenth century. The

fair showcased new technologies, architectural achievements, and cultural exhibits from around the world, helping establish Chicago as a major international city.

Although these famous structures remain part of America's World's Fair legacy, their influence extended far beyond architecture. The fairs helped reshape undeveloped areas into places that attracted businesses, tourists, and long-term investment.

Cities hosting the World's Fairs experienced development in such aspects as roadways, transportation systems, parks, and public structures. All these structures served people long after the fair ended and played an essential role in city life. In most cases, the World's Fair was beneficial to the city's development as it attracted tourists, businesses, and investments. For example, Seattle Center, built for the Century 21 Exposition in 1962, remains a very popular district of Seattle, both in terms of cultural events and entertainment, while the Space Needle is now a recognizable symbol of Seattle all over the world. In the same way, HemisFair '68, which took place in San Antonio, helped expand the River Walk project and build the Tower of the Americas, which still attracts millions of tourists every year. Thus, it becomes clear that the advantages of organizing a World's Fair are not temporary and create benefits lasting for decades.

The Position of World's Fairs Today:

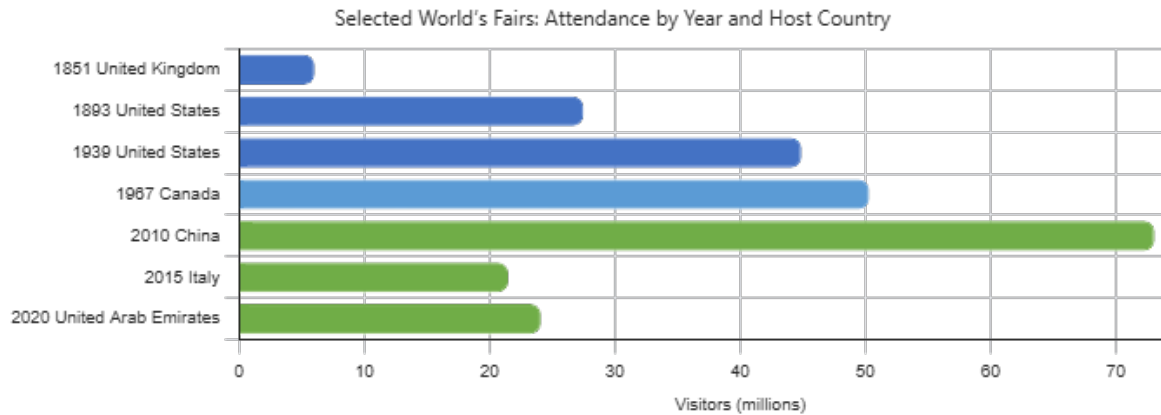


Figure 2 compares visitor attendance across major World's Fairs from 1851 to 2020. The chart shows substantial growth in attendance over time, reflecting the increasing global reach and significance of international expositions.

The role of World's Fairs has changed as technology has advanced. In the past, attending an exposition was one of the few ways people could experience new inventions and ideas firsthand. Today, new technology can be introduced to millions of people online almost instantly. Rather than making World's Fairs unnecessary, this creates an opportunity to rethink what they should offer. A modern fair has to give visitors something they cannot get from a screen: the ability to experience new technology, interact with companies and innovators, and see countries come together in one place.

The wonder of World's Fairs is able to be replicated by other mediums. Architectural historian Lydia Mattice Brandt from the University of South Carolina states, "The way that [fairs] offered fantasy...is today so easy to get in other ways, whether it's physical experiences like theme parks or movies [and the] internet" (Wong). Much of the thrill surrounding these expos has been replicated, through the ways listed above and through other world events such as

the Olympics. So this leads to the question, how can we make World's Fairs more wonderful, more exciting, and more attention-grabbing?

There is also the topic of debt. America's last World Fair in New Orleans (1984) was expected to get over 15 million visitors. Instead, only 9 million people actually were in attendance. This, along with other issues, led to around \$100 million in debt (Rossen). Eventually, after this, in 1998, Congress dissolved the United States Information Agency, which was responsible for participating in these expositions. That being said, it is also imperative that these fairs are financially managed responsibly.

In the case of the U.S., 42 years is a long time to go without hosting a World Fair, especially for one of, if not the most influential country in the world. It is not like World's Fairs have completely ended either, as many other countries, especially developing ones, still participate in these events. The U.S. bid to have Minnesota be the location for the 2027 World Fair, but lost the vote by a large margin. It is expected that Expo 2031 will occur in Minnesota, yet the fine details of this plan are unknown.

Do these expositions of invention and art no longer have a place in today's world? Not necessarily. As shown in the chart above, China's expo in 2010 had over 70 million visitors. This shows to us that World's Fairs still have a place in today's world, but the way they are organized needs to evolve. Their ability to attract millions of visitors throughout history shows that there is still value in bringing people together for a large international event. Instead of trying to recreate the World's Fairs of the past, future expositions should build on what made them successful while adjusting to the way people live, work, and experience new ideas today. With the right

planning and a clear purpose, the World's Fair can continue to be a major global event and provide benefits that go far beyond the exposition itself.

Benefits of a Modern World's Fair:

A modern World's Fair, especially in the United States, can offer lots of benefits to our country. For one, an augmentation to the current architectural landscape in America is much needed. Many of the buildings we see day to day are slowly becoming less colorful, more box-like, and overall, much gloomier. That said, a modern World's Fair could spur investment in communities and the development of public spaces and cultural districts. Adding to this, it would promote the development of infrastructure in surrounding areas, which could benefit citizens long after the expo.

In addition to increasing tourism, a World's Fair can attract new investment from businesses around the world. Companies would have the opportunity to showcase their products, meet potential investors, and build partnerships with organizations from other countries. This could bring more domestic and foreign investment in the host city and create new jobs which will support long-term economic growth. Even after the event is over, these business relationships and investments could continue benefiting the local economy for years.

Furthermore, the modern-day World's Fair will provide an excellent platform for showcasing the latest technological advances. These fairs have historically presented many inventions that have later become an integral part of our daily lives. Currently, the United States can use this fair to showcase such innovations as artificial intelligence, robotics, renewable energy, biotechnology, quantum computing, and even space exploration.

One of the greatest advantages that a modern-day World's Fair can offer is an opportunity to build good relations between countries. Even though there is fierce competition on the economic and political levels, these fairs have always allowed countries to exchange ideas, culture, and technology. In the modern world that is becoming more globalized by the day, it becomes necessary for countries to cooperate.

International participation has traditionally been one of the key features of the World's Fairs. By involving governments, universities, non-governmental agencies, and business firms of various nations in cooperation, today's World's Fair would promote collaboration despite any political differences. Such collaboration would result in joint research, investments, educational exchange programs, and diplomacy beyond the World's Fair itself.

Hosting another World's Fair would also settle the United States' position as a global leader in innovation. The country has not hosted a World's Fair since 1984, despite remaining one of the world's largest economies and one of the leading centers for scientific research and technological development. In addition, it will show its capability of bringing together governments, companies, researchers, and innovators to tackle global problems and inspire future generations. Ultimately, a modern World's Fair would be more than a temporary international event. If planned effectively, it could leave behind stronger infrastructure, increased investment, new business partnerships, and a renewed focus on innovation. These long-term benefits would continue supporting the host city and the United States long after the exposition has concluded.

Modern World's Fairs can also promote sustainable development through clean energy, eco-friendly architecture, and technology used in smart cities. Most countries attending this fair

could showcase technologies that help reduce carbon emissions and ensure efficient use of natural resources. Adopting such technologies during the hosting of this fair will not only minimize its negative impacts on the environment but also inspire others to follow suit.

The benefits discussed above show that a modern World's Fair could still have an important role in the United States. However, hosting an event of this size would require careful planning. Several decisions, including the location, theme, funding, and attractions, would play an important role in determining its success. The following section presents one possible approach to organizing a modern World's Fair in the United States.

Choosing the Right Location:

Choosing the right location is among the most crucial decisions in organizing any World's Fair. The city hosting the fair must be capable of receiving millions of visitors and offering additional benefits to its inhabitants. Some of the characteristics that a suitable location must possess include good transportation networks, hotel capacities, enough space for pavilions and events, and experience in hosting international expos as well as capacity for future economic development after the fair.

As mentioned earlier, the state of Minnesota will host Expo 2031, which will be the revival of the World's Expo in America after many years of non-activity. While this is a significant move, it still leaves another issue: what other American cities will be suitable candidates for hosting World Expos in the future. Beyond Expo 2031, there are quite a few cities that can organize such an event.

Some of the best candidates for hosting a World's Fair include Washington, D.C., Orlando, Dallas, and Chicago. Washington, D.C., offers historical relevance and has several museums and national landmarks. Orlando already has an established tourism industry and attracts millions of people every year. Dallas is still experiencing rapid economic growth and has the necessary infrastructural capabilities required for hosting major international events. Chicago can be regarded as the best candidate for hosting the World's Fair owing to the historical association of the city with World's Fairs and its established transport and convention capabilities.

As previously mentioned, Chicago hosted the World's Columbian Exposition, which was considered the most successful of all World's Fairs. The exposition was visited by more than 27 million people, who enjoyed such novelties as the first-ever Ferris wheel. Presently, Chicago is one of the biggest centers of transportation in the United States. These include O'Hare International Airport, an extensive public transportation system, thousands of hotel rooms, and McCormick Place. Hosting a World's Fair in Chicago would serve as a tribute to the past of the city and open up new economic opportunities for it.

A future World's Fair would also need to be designed differently from older fairs. Instead of creating one large site that is separated from the rest of the city, parts of the fair could be connected to existing neighborhoods, transportation, museums, universities, and public spaces. In Chicago, for example, McCormick Place could serve as one of the main centers while other events and exhibitions could take place throughout the city. This would spread visitors and economic activity across a larger area and make the fair feel like part of the city rather than a temporary attraction built outside of it.

Theme and Vision:



Figure 3. AI-generated conceptual design of the proposed U.S. World's Fair

Once the location is chosen, the next step would be setting the vision for the World's Fair. A World's Fair always carries the spirit of the age in which it was hosted. Previous expositions highlighted the Industrial Revolution and showcased inventions that transformed people's lives. A modern World's Fair should focus on the future rather than the past by showing technologies and global challenges that will shape the next generation.

A possible theme for the World's Fair could be "Inventing Tomorrow." The idea would be not just to present innovations but for each nation to exchange ideas and illustrate how

inventions improve people's life. The goal would be to answer an important question: What will the world look like over the next 50 years?

Each nation could have its own area at the exposition and concentrate on its advantages. So, for example, Japan could exhibit robotics and manufacturing, South Korea could show their smart technology and digital innovations, Germany could showcase sustainable engineering solutions, and America could feature artificial intelligence, biotechnologies, aerospace innovations, and entrepreneurship. Aside from showcasing the best achievements, countries will also have a chance to collaborate by organizing joint exhibits on topics related to climate change, renewable energy, global healthcare, and food safety.

One more thing that the fair should do is provide visitors with an opportunity not just to read about these ideas but to try them out themselves. Interactive exhibitions, virtual reality experiments, robotics shows, and innovation contests would help people experience futuristic technologies in person. Universities, startups, and scientific institutions could showcase their developments along with big companies in order to give young innovators the opportunity to present their ideas alongside established companies.

The fair could also change throughout the months that it is open. Instead of every pavilion presenting the same exhibition from opening day to closing day, countries and companies could introduce new projects, demonstrations, and competitions throughout the event. Certain weeks could focus on different areas, such as space, transportation, healthcare, or energy. This would make the fair less like a traditional exhibition and more like an event that continues developing while it is happening. It could also encourage people to visit more than once because there would always be something new to see.

Competition could also become a bigger part of future World's Fairs. Countries, companies, universities, and startups could compete for awards in areas such as new technology, design, transportation, energy, or architecture. Visitors could also vote for their favorite exhibits and inventions. This could encourage participants to bring their best ideas to the fair rather than simply creating a traditional pavilion. Awards could also give smaller companies and startups an opportunity to receive international attention alongside much larger organizations.

Another important idea would be inspiring future generations. Besides learning about science and technologies from the world fair, students could learn about solving problems through collaboration between research, creativity, and cooperation between different countries. Through education and practical experiments, the event could motivate people to choose a career in science, engineering, healthcare, and entrepreneurship.

Finally, this World's Fair can highlight our help and expansion to developing countries. World's Fairs are great tools to help developing nations jumpstart international trade, learn more about technological advancements in our country, and help modernize their image. This could serve as a catalyst for the U.S. to work alongside developing countries and introduce them to our technology. This assists in creating strong relations and can influence the economy mutually between nations in a positive light.

Funding:

One of the biggest concerns about a modern World's Fair is its cost. Hosting an international event requires significant investment in infrastructure, security, transportation, and daily operations. The host government usually provides the largest share of funding. For

example, Dubai invested billions of dollars in infrastructure and Expo-related projects to prepare for Expo 2020, while also dedicating government budget reserves specifically for the event. World Expos are often viewed as long-term economic investments because they attract tourism and create more jobs.

However, financial responsibility should not fall on a single organization. Instead, the next World's Fair can be funded through both public and private companies. Expo 2020 Dubai awarded billions of dirhams in contracts to businesses and relied heavily on private sector participation.

For example, Federal and local governments could fund infrastructure projects like transportation improvements, public spaces, and security measures. Private companies would play a significant role in sponsoring exhibitions, presenting areas, and public events. Many global companies have already invested in large international events to present their product and connect with new customers. Sponsorship agreement could also reduce financial burden on taxpayers.

Additional funding should come from revenues generated by the event itself. Ticket sales, merchandise, food and beverage sales, licensing agreements, and advertising can generate a good amount of income. A World Expo can attract tens of millions of visitors, creating strong revenue streams throughout the event.

Planning for what happens after the fair should also begin before construction starts. Buildings and public spaces should be designed with a second purpose in mind rather than being built only for the exposition. After the fair, some pavilions could become offices, research centers, museums, housing, or spaces for startups and universities. This would allow the site to

continue developing after visitors leave and could prevent expensive structures from sitting unused. The future of the site should be treated as part of the original plan rather than something decided after the fair is over.

Taking the Weight off Nations:

A key point that needs to be addressed with a modern World's Fair is taking the weight and responsibility off nations. This does not mean they should have none, but that other organizations should step up and contribute. For instance, big companies like Apple, Microsoft, SpaceX, or OpenAI can set up stands, help fund the event, and introduce big ideas. However, companies do not just have to mean the big ones, like we mentioned above. Other organizations like universities, non-profits, or charities can also contribute as they please, and would be strong additions to the roster.

With the global influence many organizations have, it is important that they meaningfully contribute to these events. World's Fairs have a strong impact when they represent global platforms where businesses, entrepreneurs, and communities can work together to showcase what is possible. Many organizations already have the resources, ideas, and products that people would want to see. Additionally, innovation and development, central themes of expos, are what a good firm is all about.

With this in mind, a new economic model could also be created surrounding World's Fairs. As we mentioned, hosting an expo is not cheap. Additionally, being so reliant on solely government funding can create risks in the process. Corporate sponsorships or partnerships could help relieve some of this burden while also attracting visitors who are fans of or identify with

these companies. That being said, the goal should not to be to create a giant advertising event, but to utilize and work with these companies for meaningful experiences and lasting impressions. Exclusive product launches, talent recruitment, and real technological implementation are all ideas as to what companies could do.

Challenges & Criticism:

Of course, an event of this magnitude is much easier said than done. There are a number of challenges and criticisms that are important to consider, such as financial traps, environmental irony, and overall relevance.

First, there are many financial issues that may arise with hosting a World's Fair. Foremost, as we discussed earlier, debt is a looming issue with hosting an event of this magnitude. Zehra Abdulla and Christopher Dutt from the University of Florida's Journal of Hospitality and Tourism posted a study in August 2024 titled "Reducing mega-event syndrome: A case study of Expo 2020." One of the major findings from this study was the term "mega-event syndrome" (MES). This term describes how many mega-events, such as expositions, frequently result in budget overruns, unnecessary resource diversion, and the creation of single-purpose infrastructure that drains public funds and is left fruitless at the conclusion of the event. This has been exemplified in many of the modern World's Fairs. For instance, the recent Expo 2025 in Osaka, Japan, snowballed from its budget of 64 billion yen to over 320 billion yen due to several unfortunate reasons.

A modern World's fair should be budgeted correctly and realistically. A good practice would be to overbudget slightly, so that if more money is needed to be put forth, then it won't

come as such a shock. Additionally, finding ways to save money, like reusing buildings, or keeping the main exposition in large, open areas, is beneficial.

Secondly, there is a major environmental irony that has become apparent from many recent themes of world expositions. Many recent exposition themes have highlighted sustainability and environmental protection. Yet, the construction of events, the transportation to events, and the aftermath of events generally all have more detriment than benefit. For instance, at Expo 2025, Osaka featured the “Grand Ring,” earning a world record as the largest wooden architectural structure on Earth and was praised for its eco-friendly design. However, right after the gates of the exposition closed, the majority of its timber was slated to be demolished and grounded into chips for biomass fuel. This immediately oxidizes and releases stored carbon right back into the atmosphere, creating a carbon spike that completely contradicts the design’s intention (Ozek). Next, Expo 2015 Milan, themed “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life,” also had contradictory themes. This fair focused on sustainable food systems, biodiversity, and the fight against global hunger. That being said, the primary corporate partners there were companies like McDonald’s and Coca-Cola, which are not very favorable in the eye of the consumer, at least environmentally. Many critics pointed out the irony of using a sustainability exposition to give massive real estate to industrial fast-food conglomerates (Ventura, et. al.).

Being true to your word is something everyone values. When hosting this next World’s Fair, it is important that if sustainability is going to be a theme, it is truly valued. Prior preparation and planning would be important here to map out what will happen in terms of construction, who will be shown, and what will happen after the event. If sustainability is not going to be a prioritized theme, it should still be kept in the back of the planners’ minds.

Additionally, it could be beneficial to make clear that certain aspects of sustainability were sacrificed to bring other features to the fair.

Finally, the overall relevance of World's Fairs is a major consideration. In the past, expositions were the main launching point for invention and creativity. However, the digital age and corporate supremacy in the U.S. have largely degraded this purpose. Many people do not need to go to these events to see innovation. Additionally, the anticipation for expositions has largely disappeared. With people's shortening attention spans and growing lack of patience, most would rather break the suspense by seeing something online rather than waiting to see it at a World's Fair. Next, industry-specific alternatives offer the same kind of value, niched down to people's specific interests. It would be important for a coming World's Fair to keep these issues in mind and work towards a solution to keep the event engaging and relevant.

Niching the World's Fair could be very beneficial to retain more guests. Another alternative could be continuing the shift of World's Fairs for "nation branding." This helps to improve the national image, boost tourism, and promote the country. Although this has been criticized, tailoring it to major national events, such as the U.S. hosting a Super Bowl-themed fair, would be a strong idea.

Expected Outcomes and Long-Term Benefits:

With a successful plan, a modern World's Fair could produce long-term economic, social, and cultural impacts. One of the most immediate outcomes would be increased tourism. Millions of visitors would contribute to the local economy by spending money on hotels,

restaurants, entertainment, and local businesses. This increase in tourism will also create employment opportunities and generate additional tax revenue for the host city and state.

Another potential benefit would be a boost in investment in infrastructure. Upgrading airports, parks, and convention facilities could serve the needs of people not just during the event itself but well beyond its end date. This would also promote further economic growth and attract other businesses and international events, conferences, sports, and tourism.

One possible long-term outcome could be the creation of an innovation district around the former fair site. Some of the companies, universities, and startups that participated in the fair could be encouraged to keep a presence there after the event. Research facilities, startup offices, laboratories, and public spaces could replace temporary exhibits over time. Instead of the World's Fair ending after several months, part of the collaboration created during the event could remain in the host city.

Of course, the most valuable contribution of the World's Fair would be strengthening the U.S.'s position as a world leader in innovation. By involving the participation of governments, scientists, entrepreneurs, companies, and universities, the event would provide an opportunity to establish new alliances for further development and research. Also, some of the innovations presented at the exposition could turn into technologies and startups.

Apart from its economic value, the World Fair can make its mark in education and culture. Students will be exposed to new technology, new culture, and experts in various fields.

Finally, Word's Fair could leave behind something that cannot be measured economically, which is a renewed sense of optimism about the future. The world faces challenges such as climate change, armed conflicts, economic uncertainty, and more. By

bringing together people, expo could encourage visitors to believe that challenges can be solved through collaboration, technology, and creativity.

Conclusion:

All in all, a modern World's Fair could provide numerous benefits to the current world, seen in countries' economies, infrastructure, and overall national pride. A modern expo has to be done right. The ideas and plan for a modern World's Fair should not be based in nostalgia. Instead of focusing on how past victories could be remade, countries must adapt to make these events engaging, inspiring, and innovative in our modern era. The core purpose of World's Fairs remains valuable: bringing people together to experience new ideas and imagine what the future could look like. The opportunity today is not to recreate the fairs of the past, but to build a version that fits the modern world. With the right host city, strong leadership, meaningful corporate participation, and a clear focus on innovation, a World's Fair could once again become a major global event. The United States has the companies, universities, technology, and infrastructure needed to help lead that revival.

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