

## No Sense of Place: Comparing Disney's EPCOT and Aichi's Expo

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### Introduction

At first glance, the World Expo hosted in Aichi Prefecture in Japan might seem to bear little resemblance to the Walt Disney theme park EPCOT. The Expo was a one time event attracting just over 22 million people in 6 months while Disney's EPCOT was opened in 1982 and last year, according to the Mike Branom writing for the Associated Press, attracted over 8 million people.

On the other hand, consider briefly the similarities: the Expo was an event designed around the theme of "Nature's Wisdom" and featured a "Corporate Pavilion Zone" where visitors would be able to "enjoy entertainment using state-of-the-art technologies" (The 2005 World Exposition 4). In addition, the Expo had 6 "Global Commons" which brought together many national pavilions. Disney's EPCOT, on the other hand, is a theme park divided into a "Future World" which aims to "spark the imagination, illuminate the technological future, and heighten environmental awareness" (Birnbaum's 93) and a "World Showcase" which aims to "transport guests (at least in spirit) to many different countries" (Birnbaum's 93).

In both cases, then, we have large areas devoted to showing tourists both the technology of the future and something of the variety of the cultures and nations in the world. Both the Expo and EPCOT also have an environmental theme – predicting future's where technology and humanity exist in a more ecologically friendly balance with nature.

In this paper, I wish to address one of the common concerns I heard from my students during the run of the Aichi Expo: namely that the various national pavilions did not seem to give them much sense of the country that the pavilion was supposed to represent. As such, I will not be addressing the Expo pavilion for Japan as the Expo was located inside Japan and the pavilion itself was surrounded by displays of Japanese culture and crafts, making it unnecessary for the pavilion to carry the cultural weight of representing Japan. I will also only make passing comments about the United States showcase in Disney as it also is located in the host country.

As a starting framework, I will describe each of the national pavilions/showcases which are redundant between the Expo and EPCOT and then proceed to ask the question of national representation and culture bearing. This past year, during the run of the Expo, I made six visits to the Expo and two visits to EPCOT to compare and contrast the buildings and their contents, so the following description of EPCOT is contemporaneous with the 2005 Expo. As there are fewer countries in EPCOT, I will organize the descriptions using their arrangement in EPCOT following a semi-circle from Canada to Mexico.

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## Canada

The Canadian Showcase in EPCOT features a small group of buildings and a totem pole providing a sense of the scope of Canada in its history from log cabin trading stations to grand hotels. The attraction in Canada is a short film titled “O Canada!” The film, like the architecture, reflects a theme of diversity – taking the viewers on a trip through the seasons, regions, and dialects of Canada. It culminates in a discussion of nature in Canada and the “O Canada!” song which is performed in both English and French. The Canadian showcase has a steak restaurant and a gift shop selling a variety of Canadian goods.

The Canadian pavilion was housed in a large building with maple leaves decorating the top and banners of the six people featured in the movies at eye level. It featured two wordless movies following the lives of six people who live in different areas of Canada. After the movies, Canada had sets of computer terminals where you could take virtual tours of the cities the six Canadians lived in. The Canadian pavilion did not have a gift shop or a restaurant.

## England

The English showcase, like that for Canada, features a variety of facades for buildings in a variety of styles. England features a pub as well as a fish and chip shop but has no central attraction. It does feature a live band playing the Beatles’ music, however. England also has several gift shops selling imported tea and other goods.

The entry to the English pavilion was through a small garden. The pavilion itself featured several exhibits about how nature could be used to teach us how to improve the products we make and use: for example, how to make clothing more breathable or how to make gloves and shoes which could help a person climb a building. There was a small gift shop in England selling mostly tea and cookies.

## France

The French showcase features a miniature Eiffel Tower in addition to the buildings done in a 19<sup>th</sup> Century style. The central attraction in the French showcase is the film “Impressions de France.” The French film features nature and castles before moving on to a variety of foods. Eventually it becomes a travel film taking the viewer from the countryside into Paris.

The French pavilion was housed in a large building shared with Germany. The interior was very modern and empty – featuring a sphere made of plastic and a few small television screens showing some scenes of agriculture and a person preserving a bird. The central attraction in France was a 360 degree film about the destruction of nature by humans. It had very little information about France, itself. There was a small gift shop shared by both the French and German pavilions.

## Morocco

The Moroccan showcase features a number of buildings constructed around a central plaza which is covered in ceramic tiles. The buildings vary in style from quite ornate to very simple. Morocco’s central attraction is a museum which features a few works of art, but has very little narrative voice. Morocco has a restaurant and several shops in the alleys

surrounding the plaza.

The Moroccan pavilion was a small, brown building which featured a great deal of tile, just as the EPCOT showcase had. The pavilion featured televisions showing scenes of Morocco and a number of handcrafts. There was also an artisan who the visitors could watch making crafts. Morocco had a small area for tea and a gift shop.

## **Japan**

I will include a short description of the Japanese showcase for completeness' sake. The Japanese showcase features a torii gate and a Mitsukoshi store housed in a structure built to look like a 7<sup>th</sup> century castle in Kyoto. The central attraction in Japan is a museum which, in 2005, was displaying toys made out of tin. Japan has several restaurants ranging from a tempura restaurant to a steak (teppan) restaurant.

At the Expo, Japan had an entire zone with several pavilions. The main Japanese pavilion featured a bamboo covering and focused on the connections between humans and nature.

## **The United States**

The American showcase is housed in a Colonial style mansion and features a “pre-show” museum which, in 2005, included African and African inspired art and a collection of flags from the history of the United States. The central attraction in the American showcase is a discussion of the history of the United States performed by puppets. The narrators are Mark Twain and Benjamin Franklin – with Franklin presenting the “optimistic” view of U.S. history and Twain presenting the “pessimistic” view. It is worth noting that the opening word of the show is “America.” It is also worth noting that the American showcase has no restaurant or gift shop.

The United States pavilion was housed in a large building with red panels on the top and television screens showing scenes of life in the United States at eye level – ranging from food in Chicago to NASCAR racing. The US pavilion featured a “pre-show” explaining the life and times of Benjamin Franklin and a movie in which an actor portraying Franklin talked about the advances humanity has made in the last 200 years. It is worth noting that between the pre-show and the movie, the words “United States” and “America” are never used. In fact, only once is the word “Americans” used – and that is in reference to Native Americans. The post-show featured a model of the Wright airplane, models and photographs from the space program, a fuel cell, and a futuristic car. The U.S. pavilion had no restaurant or gift shop.

## **Italy**

Like the English showcase, the Italian showcase is based entirely around the architecture. Italy has several buildings inspired by Venice and it has a restaurant as well as gift shops featuring imported wine and other goods.

The Italian pavilion was housed in a large building with an ocean motif painted on the top. The inside of the pavilion was a very mixed bag. You began by taking a walk over water and looking at variety of goods ranging from a bicycle to mechanical parts. Then you passed a recently recovered statue. Finally, you entered a large, open room with goods representing different areas of Italy ranging from fashion to furniture to chocolate. There was a small gift

shop and a restaurant was located on the second floor.

### Germany

The German showcase is centered around a plaza with a giant clock. There is a restaurant and several shops selling imported goods. Like England and Italy, however, it has no central attraction.

The German pavilion was housed, as previously mentioned, in one large building shared with France. The central attraction of the German pavilion was a ride through the pavilion. The ride took the visitors under water and into the sky. They could see screens showing nature and the use of nature to develop technology. They could also see parts of Germany. Germany had a restaurant and shared a gift shop with France.

### China

The Chinese showcase features a variety of buildings modeled after temples in Beijing. It frequently features live performers, but in 2005 it featured several displays about the newest Disney theme park in Hong Kong. The central attraction in China is the film “Reflections of China.” This film is narrated by an actor portraying Chinese poet Li Bai. The film travels from the Great Wall to small, countryside villages to Beijing and Shanghai – emphasizing the connection to nature and the Yangtze river. The Chinese showcase is unusual in EPCOT in that it has the only direct appeals for tourism (both the display about Hong Kong Disney and the end of the film, where Li Bai closes by saying that he hopes to see the viewers in China again.

The Chinese pavilion was housed in a large building with a red and green façade. The building featured a staircase with a “leaf vein” theme which looked rather like a large jade carving showing a variety of major steps in Chinese history including an abacus and moveable type. The central attraction was a series of display terminals with information about cities in China. There was also a movie promoting the 2010 Shanghai Expo. The Chinese pavilion had a small gift shop?

### Norway

The Norwegian showcase features buildings built around a small plaza. The buildings include a wooden stave church and a copy of the Akershus Castle. Norway has two central attractions: a boat/coaster ride called the Malestrom and a short movie about Norway. The boat ride is a travel through a variety of areas in Norway until you are thrown backwards by mythical creatures. You are saved by another spirit who sends you forward again toward the future. The future, in the ride, is an oil refinery out in the ocean. The movie in Norway shows a boy looking at a recreation of a boat imagining the Vikings preparing to sail and then the oil refineries. It returns to scenes of nature in Norway.

Norway was represented in the Aichi Expo in the Nordic pavilion. The Nordic pavilion was a large building with a white and blue facade. The pavilion featured a “slice of life” approach with information about a person from each of the countries represented. There were cases with the personal effects of the person along with short movies and some written explanations. The Nordic pavilion featured both a restaurant and a gift shop.

## Mexico

The Mexican showcase is housed inside a pyramid surrounded by trees. Inside, there is a marketplace selling a variety of imported goods. The central attraction in Mexico is a boat ride called “El Rio del Tiempo.” The boat ride takes you from the past of Mexico through a children’s day celebration which Birnbaum’s calls a “south of the border It’s a Small World knock off” (117) to the present day (or, what seemed like the 1980s) where you are followed by a variety of shop employees imploring you to buy their goods.

The Mexican pavilion was housed in a large, relatively unadorned building. The entry way led the visitors through a wall of mist into a dark area with many photos of animals and nature leading to handmade crafts. There were also several examples of naturalistic art including a tree made out of leaves. Mexico also had a section of nature as a product – things like latex and cacao. Finally, it featured an interactive language screen showing English, Japanese, and Spanish words. It is interesting to note that there were no scenes of cities or villages in the Mexican pavilion. Mexico had a gift shop and a restaurant.

## Analysis

In each case, for the countries which sponsored space in the Expo and in EPCOT, the façades of the buildings at the Expo were rather plain and made no attempt to recreate a sense of place. Where EPCOT featured characteristic or typical architecture from the Japanese torii gate to the Eiffel Tower in France, the physical buildings in the Expo were square, modern and almost identical to each other – save for color choice. This similarity is even more striking when you consider that it need not have been so. Qatar and Yemen both had façades for their pavilions which gave a sense of regional architecture.

Of these 11 countries, only Morocco and the United States had showcases and pavilions that seemed at all similar between the Expo and EPCOT. Morocco in both places had a similar architectural style (inside the buildings) and the United States had a presentation by the same historical figure, Benjamin Franklin.

In several cases, most notably the United States, the national pavilions seemed to go through extreme effort to avoid talking about the country that they represented. The introduction of Franklin’s past, for example, noted that he helped found “a country” without specifying the country. Franklin, himself, referred to the great things that “you” had done – putting a man on the moon, spreading democracy around the globe, developing the iPod, etc. without discussing what country that “you” represented. France, similarly, referenced France (when talking about the amount of waste produced), but did not represent it.

Italy and China did present some image of their respective countries, but seemed to lose focus by dividing themselves up into regions and major cities. The loss of a consistent, narrative voice made them difficult to follow and even overwhelming at times. Italy had a variety of sections, ranging from recovered artifacts to classic automobiles. China had 5 different sections ranging from wooden art to a movie about the 2010 Expo.

Canada and Norway’s Expo pavilions avoided talking about the countries by personalizing the content even farther down to the individual level. Rather than discuss Canada or Norway broadly, they show the audiences a “slice of life” by showing us how one person or a few people live their lives.

Mexico showed some sense of the physical environment of the country, but in a move directly opposing the content of Canada and Norway, depersonalized it. Save for a brief section on hand crafts, the Mexican pavilion was devoid of any mention of humans. It showed nature and nature inspired art. There was poetry on the walls, but almost no images of human life in Mexico.

England, Germany and, to a lesser extent, Japan focused on integrating technology and nature while downplaying their own culture or nationality. England had the garden, Germany had German scenery for the ride and Japan also showed the changing seasons in Japan, but in the main they focused on showing how nature and technology could coexist. France, on the other hand, worried about how technology was harming nature.

Why have all of these countries failed to show themselves clearly to my students? Well, it is entirely possible that they did not feel the need. These are all, perhaps save Morocco, well known and frequently visited countries. Perhaps they did not feel it was necessary to sell themselves to the visitors. What is interesting, however, is that they did sell themselves. In almost every case, the countries had gift shops where visitors could buy products, although almost none of them actively sold themselves as a spot for tourism – the clear exception being China, which in both EPCOT and the Expo was promoting tourism for a similar event occurring in China.

It seems to me, then, that the simpler explanation is a lack of rhetorical focus. The Expo provides a set of possible objectives far more complicated than EPCOT. EPCOT is clearly intended to expose visitors to the foods, sights, and products of the countries who support the showcases. It may not, and in many cases does not seem to, be about tourism per se. Rather, the aim is exposure. The Expo, on the other hand, has not only these two possible objectives (exposure and tourism) but also the opportunity to define where a country stands on a given issue. England can appeal to the world to integrate technology and nature while France can warn us of the dangers of technology for nature. If it is true that too many cooks spoil the pot, then it would seem that at the Expo, too many rhetorical aims spoiled the message. The audiences, at least the one containing my students, had one rhetorical situation in mind and the creators of the pavilions had something else in mind.

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