

INTERVIEW WITH GILMORE CLARK, LAST SURVIVING MEMBER OF WORLD'S FAIR BOARD OF DESIGN, JUNE 9, 1980. Tell me something about how you became involved with the Board of Design of the Fair.

A. Well let me give you a preface to it. A group of citizens got together in the early spring of 1937 and they formed a corporation and elected Grover Weyland president, and in order to facilitate design and construction, they came up with the idea of a Board of Design. That wasn't new because I had been chairman of the Board of Design of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Housing projects, so that was not a new idea. But anyway, they appointed three to a board of design. They were Frank Vorhees of Vorhees, Walker, Foley and Smith architects, Richmond H. Shreve of Shreve Lamb and Hartman and myself with the authority to appoint two or four more to the board. So we got together early in the winter of 1936-37. We got together and decided that we'd add four, so we added Robert D. Cone, architect, William Adams Delano, architect; then the industrial designer and I insisted that we have an engineer, so we added Jay Donner who was an old friend of mine and colleague. He was chief engineer of the Westchester County Park system when I was the landscape architect. And we wanted the engineering profession represented. So that comprised the Board of Design of seven and then we started out to get a pattern for the payout of this old garbage dump which Flushing Meadows had been at the time and we each one of us made studies independently on the drafting boards for a pattern for the fair.

Well each one made two or three and we put them up on the wall and looked them over and one that I had made was selected as the pattern for the fair. It was the same plan used in the 1964-65 fair. I was conscious of the fact that this was going to be a public park so my design was prepared with the future in mind so it wouldn't be too alien to a public park. And I knew we were going to plant a lot of trees and that they'd mature and be a part of the Park afterwards.

Q. What about some of the other plans, some of the alternatives that they'd come up with? I was talking to Ian, Wood and Silverman and he mentioned an S-shaped, serpentine plan that he had submitted for consideration.

A. I remember very well. I don't remember what happened to those. They may be in the archives at the fair up in the Museum of the City of New York. They were pretty fragile. They were on tracing paper and may not have survived, but I don't know.

Q. I'm curious about some of the discussion that led up to your plan. Why was it considered the most feasible of all of these alternatives?

A. I don't know. We didn't spend too long at it. They were pretty roughly drawn and they were put up on the wall and they knew that it had to have a theme for the fair, and this plan that I fashioned gave them a central point to put something. We had no idea what it was going to be at that time. So that's why the Tylon and Perisphere were such a rage. It gave a focus and the plan led itself to a reasonable design for a park afterwards.

Central Park has a mall pretty much like the fair except that only at one point of it, this park didn't lend itself so well to informality because it was absolutely flat. It wasn't level but a flat piece of land. You see, I had been in the park business for a good many years. I was landscape architect for the Westchester County Park Commission from its inception to 1950. So I had quite a bit of experience. And I had been consultant to the Park Department of the City of New York when Moses was commissioner. And he was commissioner at the time of the 1939 fair.

The city paid for all the fill and excavation of the lakes to get material and the placing of the fill. I had a lot to do with that. I didn't think the city still had them. That's good history to keep, particularly since they put the 1964-65 fair on the same site and no one knew in 1939 that there would be another fair on the same site. So we got underway as I say in the winter of 1937 and it went through '37, '38 and she opened in the spring of 1939 some time.

Q. What were your primary responsibilities on the Board of Design?

A. Well the board itself had the responsibility of passing on the designs submitted by all the exhibitors and upon the design of any buildings built by the fair itself. In other words, they acted as sort of an art commission for the entire enterprise.

Q. And how did the private exhibitors take to this certain element of control over what were essentially privately sponsored buildings and exhibits? Did they cooperate with you?

A, Oh, they were very cooperative. We didn't override them very hard. They understood there had to be sort of a general overall composition that had continuity to it and we had an expert on color whose name slips me at the moment and we had the colors of the buildings, and we had the buildings of each exhibitor having to conform with the particular color of that area that was designated, so it was a color scheme that went throughout, and that made that fair in my own opinion a lot more handsome than the 1964-65 fair. There were varied types of architecture. They had all the distinguished architects around New York of that period represented in the fair except for Frank Lloyd Wright, but Wright wouldn't have gotten along with anybody. If he would have been put in in command that would have been all right for him, otherwise you never could have used him.

Q. Did you think the fair was successful in kind of making New Yorkers feel upbeat?

A. I think both fairs were successful except from a financial standpoint. They lost about 60 cents on the dollar and those of us who had been mixed up with the Chicago fair, they lost about the same amount of money. I designed the New York State Exhibit at the 1933 Chicago Fair.

Q. Do you think that the color scheme of the fair was effective?

A. I think it was successful in relation to the fact that each exhibitor couldn't go and do anything he pleased. He had to conform to a scheme which was necessary I think.

It was necessary because if you let every architect have his way it would have been pretty much of a hodge-podge, whereas as it was it had a unity that it otherwise couldn't have had.

My part in the thing was the overall plan and the planting of trees and whatever else, general treatment of the whole area outside of the exhibits, and that sort of helped to unify the area--those two roads of pinoaks are still there and they were little things when they were planted. I've forgotten how many trees were moved into the grounds.

There was one other thing that was very unusual. The Holland government contributed something like 60,000 tulip bulbs and we had to arrange them in garden patterns. My then wife was a landscape architect and she had a lot of experience in gardens and the board hired her over my protest to lay out these designs for the tulip bulbs. But she was aware when you had the name of a tulip, she had had so much experience with gardens and tulips in particular that she knew the height that they would grow and if you layed out these patterns of tulips and they were up and down like that it wouldn't have counted at all. But she made the arrangement for these 60-odd thousand tulip bulbs and that was a great show when the fair opened.

And that was just about the beginning of color photography too. The lighting was done by Bassett-Jones and Basset was an old friend of mine and he did a splendid job of lighting.

Q. How did you get on with the other members of the Board of Design? Did you all work in harmony?

A. Well, everybody got along swimmingly. We had known one another before. I knew all of the architects. I had been Dean of the College of Architecture at Cornell for fifteen years so I kind of got to know them. I commuted to Ithaca, up there three days and down here three days to keep my professional work going. I did it as a labor of love and had a good time doing it. Everybody got along very well indeed. It was headed by an unusually competent architect as an administrator--Frank Vorhees who was chairman of the boards. Then we had members of the firms. Bill Lamb had a lot to do with the design and Ralph Walker or Vorhees, Walker, Foley and Smith, they were consultants.

Q. What about William R. Ludlow? I understand that he had something to do with the inception of this radial plan and Hugh Ferriss also was one of the official delineators.

A. William R. Ludlow doesn't ring a bell with me at all--never heard of him. We had a good many employees and I didn't know all of them of course. There were a good many students just out of architecture school. As I look back over the members of the board or the corporation, the Executive committee of the corporation, I don't think any of them are alive now. I would imagine that most of the Board of Design files are in the New York Public Library.

One thing in passing: When the fair was demolished, I did my best to try to save the structural steel of the Unisphere. It was beautifully fashioned.

And after they took the plaster off the outside, I got in touch with Bob Moses and said Bob, we've just got to save that structural element. And he says we're not going to do anything of the sort, and he had it all cut up and torn down. Then when it came time for the 1964-65 fair, he called me up one day and he says, Gil, we've got to have a theme for the fair. How do we go about it? Well, I said you hire somebody, tell them to make a theme for the fair. And he said you handle it. Well, I thought to myself before I handle it, I'll see what I can do myself so I was on a trip out West and I started doodling on a pad and realizing that it would be wise to use the old foundations of the old Unisphere or Perisphere and a lot of piles and concrete and it cost a lot of money, I thought to myself I'm going to design something that can use that foundation. So that was the beginning of the design of the Unisphere and I just drew a circle and put the continents on it, then I put three rings around it representing the first trip that somebody made around the earth. rendering out of it. I took it over to the Board of Design whatever it was and Bob Moses accepted it and got them to approve it and said that's going to be the central element of the '64-65 fair. I had the thing detailed carefully and put it in stainless steel and the United States Steel Corporation said they would build it and do the structural design of it if they weren't badgered to have a building besides that. That was all they wanted to do.

So that's how the Unisphere came into being and was put right on the foundations of the old Perisphere.

We had a more sympathetic attitude to a display of art in the 1939 fair than we did in the 1964 fair. At that time I was chairman of the National Commission for Fine Arts for thirteen years and a member of it for 20 from 1937 to 1950. And we were having difficulty getting murals and sculpture so the commission proposed that one percent requirement on public buildings. It was too small--it should have been two percent, but it's fortunate that they put that in there at that time. It opened up a tremendous opportunity for artists. Biddle became a member of the commission but that was after I left in 1950 and he had quite a set with the commission over his proposal to have the decoration of the Treasury Department which was the very first commission that the Federal government altered.

I have bound the complete Minutes of the Commission of Fine Arts while I was a member from 1932 to 1950. I don't know what to do with them. I don't know whether to sent them to the Library of Congress that is supposed to get my papers after I die or what to do with them. That volume covered an interesting period from 1932 to 1950 and . . .

You see, at that time--1939--they had to have a plan. They had to have a breakdown of that plan into plots which seemed to be logical plots like a piece of real estate and then they had to go to a sales organization to sell these plots to the various exhibitors.

Now, sometimes an exhibitor would want two plots instead of one or one and a half and that was all worked out, and then they submitted their preliminary sketches to the board and the board would comment on them or approve them and then they'd go ahead and do their building which was if it was in a certain spot the color scheme would have to conform to that particular spot. So we had the most friendly series of meetings that I can remember of any board I've served on and I've served on a lot of boards in my lifetime and there was no friction whatsoever.

We had a very excellent chairman in Frank Vorhees and he kept the thing on pretty much an even keel all the way through and Bob Cone was interested in this housing and general planning, it wasn't brought up and made important enough for me to reemember. How Wally happened to remember it I don't know.

For your archives I have a great many photographs taken by a professional photographer and they're down at my old office. The only reason I left them there is because I haven't got any place for them here. But you could have access to them and it might be interesting for your exhibit to have a set of glossy prints of them. They're excellent photographs and I kept them as long as I could and also with those I have a set of negatives of the Westchester County Park System which I was landscape architect of and so I had those all together but I left them at the office. I've retired now and I left them all there.

Q. When you finally saw the fair in its final form after it got off the drawing board, after all the plans had become complete, do you feel that it functioned as you had planned it to function?

A. I don't know. Don't forget that was 40 years ago, and I had so many activities in my career subsequent to that that I don't remember. I would say from my experience with it and going back and visiting it, which was not very often as a matter of fact, that it was a great success. It was certainly a success from the point of view of attendance. They made a fine record of attendance. And in consideration of the people we were working with and of their experience and their limitations, I would say that we got out of it about as good a result as you could because after all it's all a matter of personalities and it was as great a success I think as the 1893 fair in Chicago.

But that 1893 fair influenced the architectures of the next fifty years. On the other hand, this fair it seemed to me instead of influencing architecture, the architecture influenced it. It's quite the reverse. We were coming into a modernistic period of architecture, and that architecture dominated the fair.

Teague designed some buildings for the fair but I don't remember which ones they were and he had quite an influence on the board and he was very highly respected. He had the good fortune to be a very decent fellow in addition to being a very competent designer. And it was very interesting the way that board was built. As I told you they selected four and they said you go ahead. You've got a start on this thing. Select your chairman and you can add two or you can add four. So we three sat down at the University Club I think it was and then we decided to add four.

Q. Well who picked you initially?

A. I think George. . . had more to do with picking me than anybody else because I didn't know Grover Weyland. I had worked with and known Bob Moses for fifty years or more and he didn't have much to do with that 1939 World's fair. I was landscape architect for the parks department at that time. Of course if you'd talk to Bob about it you'd think that he had everything to do with it. He was glad to have me there because he was pretty sure he'd get something rational rather than something otherwise. We had a little trouble in the fact that I had sort of a Beaux Arts scheme which it really is and basically it's a formal design and it gets off into the informalities when you from center and that didn't please some of the younger architects who worked in these offices who were related to the board. They wanted something higgly-piggly with no center of interest that would be focussed on. And I was conscious of the fact that there would be a park there afterwards and we wanted to have some semblance of order at least in the central element of it. And of course you were cut by the parkway and had to build two bridges to cross to the other side there, but the architects were pretty much classicists. Dick Shreve wasn't an architect but his top man was there, Bill Lamb. And he was classical. Then there was Frank Vorhees and Frank Walker was classically trained and the only one who was not a classist and yet he was was Teague.

So when the plan came up as I remember it was no great argument about it. We put them all on the wall and they went and selected mine. I don't know where the alternatives are--I'd like to see them myself.

It's funny. When you're back there and doing these things, you don't think of posterity very often especially when it's something that doesn't actually come through but is an alternative that was discarded at some point and they were on fragile paper too.

For the 1964-65 World's Fair I should have done what I was asked to do and that was to get others to make studies. Instead of that I made one myself and got it accepted and that was the end of it. I didn't have the patience to go through all that because I knew very well we'd get a lot of crackpots in there and argue and so on and they couldn't accuse me of being classical.

Q. Did you know at that time that the underlying theme overall would be Peace Through Understanding?

A. Yes. Did you ever notice the topographical design of the continents on that? It's sort of a lumpy design so that it could be bent without getting creases in it and it was pressed steel. It's not topographical--it's the same all over. There's no attempt to show the mountain ranges and anything like that would have been too much of a problem. The 1939 theme was done inside of the Perisphere and they had a moving platform with a moving stairway going up to that.

Q. Which do you think were the more effective exhibits? What is it that stands out in your mind that you feel is most important?

A. Oh, that would be hard to say. I really don't remember.

I worked on it so long and I don't suppose I made more than three trips to it. I suppose I felt once it opened I had done my job and I had a lot of other things to do and I didn't like crowds to begin with. I see the thing as an ensemble and no particular exhibit stands out in my memory now. I could look at pictures and I might be able to find out but unfortunately I've got cataracts and I can't see those pictures.

See, we did pretty well because all the architects had to submit their designs to one board and the board had quite a . . . over some of the architects and didn't try to stifle them as I remember. They gave them a great deal of freedom and yet the fair had a unity that was brought about by the plan to begin with, by the trees and other plantings, and they gave a unity to that main axis. Our offices were first on the 80th floor of the Empire State building and as a matter of fact we could look out and see where more or less the fair was to be from up there and then when they got the central building built where the offices were then we moved everything over there. And in going over there once or twice a week to meetings we could see the progress of the fair as we would be right there.

The 1964-65 fair didn't depart from the 1939 fair principally because they had the pattern that they had to fit.