



# I Have Seen the Future: Visitor Memories from World's Fairs of the Atomic Era



Natalie Pickens  
Advisor: Dr. Anne Nurse

## Abstract

From it's a small world to conspiracy theories and a serial killer to the ice cream cone, there is very little in the modern day that is not related to the World's Fair in one way or another. On top of the new technologies and cultural showcases, the Fairs are notable for attracting visitors from all around the world, and act as a backdrop for many cherished memories. Even as the World's Fairs begin to disappear from our cultural zeitgeist, there is no shortage of passionate fans, archivists, historians, and former fairgoers sharing their thoughts and photos.

This I.S. examines visitor memories from the 1962 Seattle World's Fair and 1964-1965 New York World's Fair. I conducted a literature review, identifying themes of Futurism, Nationalism, "Humans as Animals," and Memory. My theory dives into Cultural Performance, Presentation of the Self, Imperialist Nostalgia, and Episodic versus Semantic memories. I found that memories of the World's Fairs are largely episodic symbolizing that these were events that deeply resonated with visitors in the moment, and 60 years later.

## Theory

### Episodic vs. Semantic Memory

Episodic memories are connected to one's personal experiences while semantic memories are beliefs that are often facts or broader, cultural memories.

### Collective Memory

Collective memory is both the shared memories of a group of people and the process through which memories are preserved, distributed or destroyed. Collective memory cannot be isolated to an individual because it is a process of group input and documentation. Memory is inherently collaborative.

## Acknowledgements:

Thank you to my interviewees Bill, Allen, Thomas, Susan, Ilene and Bob for sharing your stories with me and allowing me to share them with everyone else. This project would not have been possible without you. Dr. Haely, Dr. Thomas and Prof Duval for your support through my whole college career in and outside of the Anthropology Department. Finally, my advisor Dr Anne Nurse, this project would not be here without your encouragement and guidance. From my first ever college class to my IS advisor, I hope I can be just like you when I grow up.

## What Do Visitors Actually Remember?

### Themes and Illustrative Quotes



### The Future

"I believed we would be living like the Jetsons by now" (Facebook Comment).  
The future was "bright and rosy, and here's all these wonderful things we were going to have" (Ilene).

### Place Making - National Pride

"Unlike maybe today, I was really proud that New York was hosting something like that, and that New York could put it together, and to make it so beautiful, and I mean, so memorable it was. My mouth was open" (Susan).

### Mementos - Memorabilia

Ilene's memory of making Mold-o-Rama dinosaurs, figurines made on the spot with hot wax. She kept her dinosaurs for a long time, until her stepfather threw them away. Now she has repurchased three dinosaurs, "but they're not my original ones. So, you know, it's better than nothing" (Ilene).

### Do you think about the Fair Today?

"I guess I do, but do I think about it? I kind of wish it was happening again, because I live not that far away from the fairgrounds. I do pass it... it's right over there, you can see the Unisphere from all different places. So, yeah, I think about it a lot" (Ilene).

"In my daily life, yeah? Like it's a memory a mine that is with me every day" (Susan).

"I warn people not to get me too riled up about the topic, or they will suffer from my stories with a test at the end" (Bill).

### Coming of Age - Romance

"My boyfriend and I started dating in 1964 and we would drive over to the New York World's Fair on the weekend and spend all day there. I was 17 and he was 18½. The first time we held hands was at the Fair. Our first kiss was after spending the day at the Fair. At the end of the summer, he asked me to marry him! So, after I graduated high school in 1965, we got married and we would go to the Fair as a married couple" (Facebook Comment).

### Coming of Age - Independence

"When I got old enough... as a teenager, pre 16 or driving age, I would take the Greyhound bus from Tacoma, where I grew up, for \$1.90 and ride it to Seattle. Get off the Greyhound bus station, walk over here, and I first place where I would go to the international fountain, and I just sat there and just took it all in" (Bill).

### Symbols of the Fair - The Bubbleator

The Bubbleator was a "12-foot circular plexiglass bubble which they made it into an elevator, which took people from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Allen).

Many comments reflected on how special it was to see Michelangelo's Pieta.



### Memory - Othering

"It was pretty exotic, because you know, I was a little kid. And it was also the 60s. It was very new to people to see these things from other cultures" (Interview).

### Memory - Episodic

"3 of us sisters dressed in matching dresses" (Facebook).

"I got "lost and ended up in the lost and found" (Facebook).

"I would sit in front of a video monitor, and you could press a button and you could try on different hair-dos through the monitor" (Ilene).

## Methods

The research for this project is based on fieldwork during a trip to Seattle, where I visited the Fairgrounds for the 1962 World's Fair. I also visited the Museum of Pop Culture and Space Needle; the latter being built for the Fair. I conducted six interviews, completing three in-person in Seattle, and three over Zoom. I recruited the interviewees through the Facebook groups for the 1962 and 1964 World's Fairs, receiving 122 comments. Most of which contained their memories of at least one Fair. I coded these memories separately from the interviews.



## Themes and Conclusions

### Humans as Animals

It is possible to define these exhibits both as narrative constructions of evolution and human development, exploiting minorities on display AS WELL AS sites of cultural exchange and accessible learning.

### Nationalism

Nationalism was at play because all nations desired to create the best possible pavilions, boost their countries' reputation and create engaging and memorable experiences for their visitors.

### Futurism

A key lens for understanding the concept of the World's Fair is futurism. While from an outside perspective, the Fairs appear to be the pinnacle of futuristic technology, architecture and information sharing, the literature frames them differently—as a nostalgia for a future that never arrived.

### Memory

Most research examines how the organizers of the Fair create spaces for the visitor. There is much less research on what visitors actually remember from the Fairs.