From the New York Crystal Palace to the World of Tomorrow:
World's Fairs as a Transnational Series

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Introduction

In 1939, the New York "Building the World of Tomorrow" World's Fair opened its gates and greeted millions of visitors, who would be mesmerized by the fair's blatant futurism. From the stark white theme center and its urbanist exhibit "Democracity" to General Motors' Futurama pavilion, the fair became an iconic instance of modern design and a staple element of twentieth-century world's fairs history. After a long day in the "World of Tomorrow", visitors would unwind in the fair's Amusement Zone, where they could enter popular concessions such as Billy Rose's Aquacade or the towering Parachute Jump. Right in the shadow of the Parachute Jump, patrons could also visit "The Crystal Palace" (Fig. 1).[1]

Compared to the fair's predominantly streamline moderne architecture, the pavilion's quaint design stood out for its conspicuously non-futuristic design. Amidst pavilions that celebrated the "World of Tomorrow" and a large variety of futuristic-minded concessions, this pavilion dared to look into the past – more precisely, the past of world's fairs. The small pavilion featured performances from belly dancers such as "Little Egypt" as well as a musical revue that included, among others, "Stella". Both of these musical and dance performances referenced famous instances of world's fair entertainment: Little Egypt had been a staple of both the 1893 Midway and the 1933 "A Century of Progress" fair in Chicago (both times performed by the same dancer), and the latter referred to a jovial greeting "Have you seen Stella?" that had become popular at the 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition in San Francisco.[2] But the most important and obvious of these nested references to world's fair history was of course the name and design of the pavilion itself. Given the fair's futuristic seriousness, the Crystal Palace pavilion might strike as odd. For instance, Clara Boesch argues:

> New York's 1939 World's Fair took place almost ninety years after the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations. Like its predecessor, the world's fair was a celebration of progress and technology. Exhibits such as General Motors' Futurama enthusiastically predicted the "world of tomorrow", in stark contrast to the nostalgic and philistine entertainment at the Crystal Palace's vaudeville theater. Under a replica of the Crystal Palace's iconic dome, visitors could pay twenty-five cents to see such shows as "Little Egypt" and fan and bubble dancing.[3]

[1] In contrast to the Crystal Palace Musical Revue, the Parachute Jump returned for the fair's second season in 1940 and moved to a much more central and prominent position in the Amusement Zone.

[2] Paul M. van Dort, "Crystal Palace,", *1939 New York World's Fair*, n.d.'; online at http://www.1939nyworldsfair.com/worlds_fair/wf_tour/zone-7/Crystal_Palace.htm

[3] Clara Boesch, "Crystal Palace Musical Revue at the 1939 New York World's Fair", *New York Crystal Palace 1853,* 2017. Online at http://crystalpalace.visualizingnyc.org/digital-publication/object/crystal-palace-musical-revue/

However, while everyone invested in world's fair history may be immediately familiar with the term "Crystal Palace", it is rather dubitable that every fair visitor in 1939 knew the reason for this curious aesthetic choice. Moreover, even if visitors were familiar with the term, it is also unclear if the correct reference came to mind. Rather than the famous greenhouse building that housed the first world's fair in London in 1851, the musical pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair referred to a much more obscure, certainly less popular, and very local precursor in world's fair history: the 1853/54 "Exhibition of the Industries of All Nations". This exhibition, the first world's fair in the United States, was held in New York City as a direct response to the 1851 exhibition. Therefore, almost a century before the fair that has arguably become one of the most iconic instances in world's fair history, America's first world's fair also took place in New York City.

Standing at the very beginning of the world's fair medium, the 1853/54 fair was a rather rushed attempt to copy London's "Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations" of 1851. However, in contrast to London's first world's fair, which, together with its famous Crystal Palace building, became an icon of world's fair history, the New York City Crystal Palace was soon forgotten. Metaphorically speaking, the fact that the Crystal Palace Pavilion of 1939 was an element of that fair's sideshow is fitting insofar as the original structure and event was also quickly sidelined in world's fairs history. Without any doubt, the New York Crystal Palace is a rather obscure entry in the long list of international exhibitions, held in a time before the consolidation of world's fairs as a movement and for many critics failing to create any kind of incentive for successors.

As a consequence, the New York Crystal Palace has been largely ignored by world's fair historiography. Many accounts (and the BIE itself) completely forego this event and rather treat the 1855 Paris Exposition Universelle as the first "proper" follow-up to the 1851 London exhibition. *Meet Me at the Fair* (Hollenberg et al. 2014) does not even mention the fair, while Erik Mattie's *World's Fairs* (1998) only mentions New York in the context of insignificant reactions to the London exhibition.[4] Most commonly, short references to the fair are usually accompanied by rather dismissive qualifications of the fair's merits and enumerations of its shortcomings. For this critical stance on the New York Crystal Palace, Paul Greenhalgh's assessment in *Fair World* (2010) is a representative example:

> The exhibition tradition began in America with the New York World's Fair of 1853, but this has to be regarded somewhat as a one-off speculative venture, organised principally for profit from the stir caused by the Crystal Palace exhibition in London two years before. Despite its novelty – in a still-young country decades away from the founding of the majority of its cultural institutions – the venture was a financial failure. The real opening of the American fair tradition came in 1876, with the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. It was here that a proper organisational base for American World's Fairs was worked out.[5]

[4] Erik Mattie, *World's Fairs* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 17-20.

[5] Paul Greenhalgh, *Fair World: A History of the World's Fairs and Expositions from London to Shanghai 1851-2010* (Winterbourne: Papadakis, 2011), 62.

Another eminent scholar of world's fairs, Robert Rydell, described the exhibition in hardly more flattering terms and concludes: "As an effort to inspire Americans with a sense of nationalism, the New York Crystal Palace Exhibition failed".[6]
In fact, one has to look beyond orthodox world's fair studies to find accounts that take the fair seriously. Astrid Böger's *Envisioning the Nation*, an Americanist study on early U.S. world's fairs from 1853 to 1915, is among the few examples of comprehensive accounts of different world's fairs that devotes more than a passing glance or an indifferent paragraph to the New York Crystal Palace.[7] Quite the contrary: Structurally equal to her analyses of the 1876 Philadelphia Exhibition or the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, Böger devotes an entire chapter to the 1853/54 Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations. In another academic field, namely New York City history, the fair had also been neglected for a long time as well. While two of the most extensive historical accounts of the history of New York City, Edward Robb Ellis' *The Epic of New York City* (1966) and Burrows and Wallace's *Gotham* (1999), do in fact feature the fair, they only briefly address it and treat it as a historical oddity and inconsequential one-shot. However, recently, this treatment has been rectified by Edwin G. Burrows' book *The Finest Building in America. The New York Crystal Palace 1853-1858* (2018). In this short study, not only is the fair described in much more detail, but it is also placed much more thoroughly in the historical context(s) of antebellum New York City. Due to their less normative and more detailed approaches to the fair, both Böger's and Burrows' accounts are important sources for my own understanding of the New York Crystal Palace and, by extension, the argument I try to develop through this rather overlooked world's fair.

In this chapter, I want to propose that the New York Crystal Palace, while in many regards indeed a financial failure and organizational dead end, does in fact help us considerably to get a grip on the unique conjunction between national(ist) and transnational elements of world's fairs; at the same time, it also lays bare the formal rationale of the emerging medium – both in the United States and beyond. Obscure though it has become, this exhibition was in fact an important example for the formation of world's fairs as a continuous, transnational, and popular form of cultural self-fashioning. Even though the New York Crystal Palace was indeed everything but a (cultural, economic, or political) success in its day, it still tells us a lot about the ways how early world's fairs approached the medium, and also how they engaged with questions of nationalism in a context that was, from the start, *trans*national. Therefore, I want to both salvage the 1853/54 New York fair from the dustbin of history, as well as use its formal and aesthetic choices to illustrate and flesh out an underdeveloped element of world's fairs.

It is only through the New York Crystal Palace, and especially through its blatant (and not necessarily successful) attempt to copy the London original, that a fundamental formal principle in world's fair aesthetics was established: seriality. In what follows I want to propose reading world's fairs as a serial medium, in which the first "sequel" was the New

[6] Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling & Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America. World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington: Smithsonian, 2000), 17. A similar stance can be found in David Gelernter's deprecative assessment of the fair: "There had been a previous World's Fair in New York, as a matter of fact, in 1853 and '54, but hardly a great one. It had been housed in a leaky building at Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street"; David Gelernter, *1939. The Lost World of the Fair* (New York: Avon, 1995), 64.

[7] Astrid Böger, *Envisioning the Nation. The Early American World's Fairs and the Formation of Culture* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2010), 27.

York Crystal Palace of 1853/1854. Together with the simultaneous Dublin Crystal Palace of 1853 and smaller, national exhibitions such as the Munich Crystal Palace of 1854, this conscious repetition – with a difference – of an architectural and curatorial formula established in London's Hyde Park in 1851 marked the beginning of a transnational phenomenon that has continued to spawn new iterations to the present day.

The New York Crystal Palace of 1853/1854

The "Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations", better known as the "New York Crystal Palace", was closely modeled on the successful first world's fair in London. After the spectacular success of London's "Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations", which had attracted more than six million visitors between May and October of 1851 and even turned a (modest) profit,[8] the idea to transfer the idea of a Crystal Palace to New York was soon born.[9] After a series of difficulties and delays, the New York Crystal Palace opened on 14 July 1853, more than two months later than planned. Even though the American version was much smaller than the London equivalent, the ostentatiously modern glass-and-iron construction was still the largest building in New York at the time. Designed by the German- and Danish-American designers Charles Gildemeister and George Carstensen, the Crystal Palace had the form of a Greek cross with a giant dome in the middle. The dome spanned 100 feet in diameter and topped off at a whooping 150 feet in height, while the complete structure occupied an entire city block at the northern outskirts of the city. In slight contrast to the long, rectangular London Crystal Palace, and due to the constraints of the city block on which it was constructed next to the Croton Reservoir, the Crystal Palace had an octagonal structure that consisted of four wings connected by triangular sheds in the corners.[10] In the middle of this gigantic – and, one assumes, rather noisy – one-room edifice, an equestrian statue of George Washington stood beneath a rotunda furnished with coats of arms of every US state at the time. In various nooks on two floors, a design remarkably similar to the London Crystal Palace, the different national exhibits were on display. It thus adapted and therefore both established and developed a concept that also characterized the 1855 Paris and the 1862 London exhibitions; the idea of distinct pavilions emerged only decades later for the 1867 Paris and 1876 Philadelphia Centennial exhibitions.

Regarding the exhibits themselves, it is also apparent how the London exhibition served as a model to be emulated – and refined. Even though popular items such as Samuel Colt's revolver had been part of the US presence in London, the American contribution to the London fair had been modest, for many even disappointing.[11] Therefore, freed of the constraints of cumbersome transatlantic transportation of machinery and goods, one motive in New York was to show to the world what the young nation was capable of, after all. In the New York Crystal Palace, the US accounted for about half of the 4,000 rotating exhibits from close to 20 countries (in contrast to 34 countries that had exhibited in London).[12] Next to

[8] Greenhalgh, *Fair World*, 26-27.

[9] For a detailed account of the fair's planning process, see Edwin G. Burrows, *The Finest Building in America. The New York Crystal Palace 1853-1858* (New York: Oxford UP, 2018), 46-105.

[10] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 27; Rydell, Findling & Pelle, *Fair America*, 17.

[11] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 22-23.

[12] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation,* 33-34.

products ranging from garments, chemicals, coffins, watches, seeds and vegetables, colours and dyes, an unprecedented number of sculptures were included, as well as a separate though largely undistinguished picture gallery.[13] In addition, as Böger argues, one distinct quality of the exhibition was its seamless connection of use and aesthetics, primarily through the exhibition of the novel technique of daguerreotypes and photography.[14]

Although the first season in 1853 was popular, it proved to be a financial disaster with a loss of $100,000,[15] primarily due the fact that the fair had opened more than two months later than planned and only ran for an abbreviated duration. Still, or exactly because of this, the Crystal Palace returned in 1854, or, in modern parlance, was renewed for a second season. This also reflected the fact that in contrast to London, which had been planned as a temporary exhibition from the start, the New York fair was supposed to run as a permanent business, primarily in order to recoup the initial investment. The return of the fair in 1854 started with many changes, most of which were introduced by its new "showrunner", entertainment impresario P.T. Barnum. However, after only a few weeks, Barnum resigned, stating: "I was an ass for having anything to do with the Crystal Palace".[16] Still, this second season introduced what was arguably the most lasting exhibit of the New York Crystal Palace: the spectacular demonstration by Elisha Otis of his safety elevator right in the middle of the Crystal Palace in May 1854. All of this, however, could not prevent the corporation from eventually going bankrupt and the fair closing for good in November. Ironically, the building itself would find further use in the following years for, among others, American Institute Fair. Eventually, it accidentally burned down in 1858.

The Crystal Palace and Nationalism

One aspect in which the New York Crystal Palace is no different than any other world's fair since 1851 is the fact that two of the most important elements of fair ideology, namely nationalism and capitalism, were instrumental in its inception. In the book *Fair America*, Robert Rydell and his co-authors note that "world's fairs, both in the United States and abroad, have served to advance the twin causes of nationalism and capitalism" and in another study, Rydell argues that world's fairs often "became cultural icons for the nation's hopes and futures".[17] In a similar vein, Paul Greenhalgh notes that "[t]he exposition tradition owes its existence to the politics and economics of nation state and empire".[18] For Böger, American world's fairs were "nationalizing spectacles" and "ideal vehicles by which to present national culture and memory".[19]

[13] For a detailed account of the fair's exhibited objects, see Burrows, *Finest Building*, 106-158.
[14] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 35.
[15] Rydell, Findling & Pelle, *Fair America*, 17.
[16] Quoted in Neil Harris, *Humbug. The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 147-8.
[17] Rydell, Findling & Pelle, *Fair America*, 133; Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs. The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.
[18] Greenhalgh, *Fair World*, 155.
[19] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 9, 15.

These assessments certainly apply to the most famous and iconic examples of this cultural medium, such as the London Crystal Palace of 1851, the Paris Expositions of 1889 and 1900, the Chicago World Columbian Exposition of 1893, the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in St. Louis, or the 1939 World of Tomorrow in New York. Through these spectacular events on ephemeral sites, countries and – at least in later fairs – corporations erected temporary stages for nationalist and capitalist self-fashioning, especially during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. However, already from the beginning, world's fairs have also exemplified how the medium's inherently transnational quality always already called into question the very notion of contained national cultures – at the same time that the sequential progression of world's fairs called into question the notion of individual fairs as distinct events. This quality already becomes apparent if we take a closer look at the New York Crystal Palace of 1853 and 1854. In what follows, I want to propose three vectors through which it is possible to approach the nationalist dimensions present at the New York Crystal Palace: the competition between the United States and Europe, the increasingly precarious state of the American Union in the antebellum era, and the relationship of the Crystal Palace fair to other transnational cultural forms in 1850s New York City.

The initial goal of the fair was certainly national(ist) and capitalist competition, particularly between the Old and the New World. In their account of the construction of the New York Crystal Palace, Carstensen and Gildemeister note:

> Everybody must be aware of the motives which prompted the erection of a Crystal Palace in New York for the purpose of an Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations. The astonishing success which attended the original enterprise undertaken in London in the year 1851; the eagerness with which the example was followed by various countries that signified their intention of immediately entering upon a similar undertaking—all rendered it necessary that so grand a nation as America should in its turn realize on her own soil this novel idea of our progressive era.[20]

This quote captures the competitive sentiment many American visitors and exhibitors of the London Crystal Palace felt. As a consequence, Edward Riddle, the American Commissioner to the London Exhibition, returned to the United States with the explicit goal to repeat and hopefully even outdo this event on American soil.[21] However, nationalist ideals such as cultural equality with the Old World were only some among many other factors that led to the repetition of the European formula. Another important distinction is the fact that the fair was a private endeavour primarily executed by local businessmen. In his tour guide *Fifteen Minutes Around New York*, George Foster extols the republican virtues and private enterprise behind the New York Crystal Palace vis-a-vis its European competitors:

> A few private gentlemen, whose unobtrusive lives passed at the desk of the counting-house, had accumulated a few hundred thousand dollars – and conceived the idea of

[20] George Carstensen and Charles Gildemeister, *New York Crystal Palace: Illustrated Description of the Building* (New York: Riker, Thorne: 1854), 10.
[21] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 22.

> doing by themselves for their country what the governments of England and France had done or were doing for theirs.[22]

Therefore, one goal, if not the primary one, was of course to make money. Naturally, this did not go unnoticed by the general public or critics. Take for instance the following stanza from William Withington's poem "Crystal Palace and the World's Fair in New York":

> The great crystal Palace which made such a show,
> Was in London, in the old world, where millions did go,
> But now in the new world their example we take,
> In hopes that our yankees good profit will make.[23]

Next to its openly capitalist goals, the derivative quality of the fair and its central structure was much scorned and criticized as being unimaginative.[24] On the other hand, newspaper editor and Crystal Palace champion Horace Greeley claimed that "[t]o us on this side of the water it is original".[25] Greeley's message is clear: Even though it was an obvious copy of the London fair, for Americans, the New York Crystal Palace was the 'first' fair, and no matter its shortcomings, this initial project always retains (somewhat paradoxically) the status of the original – especially for a young, aspirational nation such as the United States. Therefore, on this level, *inter*national competition goes hand in hand with a perspective that emphasizes a rather contained national culture.

Within the United States, the Crystal Palace was also a matter of national pride – and union. In her account of the Crystal Palace's function in terms of nation-building, Ursula Lehmkuhl argues that the United States was and is a "nation without a nation-state".[26] Especially in the mid-nineteenth century American republic, it was the idea of a union of different, distinct federal states that reigned supreme rather than the (European) idea of a nation-state that has evolved out of shared ethnic roots and a historically established territory.[27] In the 1850s, the conflict over the question of slavery increasingly began to drive this constructed union apart along the sectional lines of North and South, so that it might even make more sense to speak of "nation-preservation" rather than "nation-building".[28] Especially after the Compromise of 1850, Union was at stake, and an "American" mega-event such as the Crystal Palace was an obvious opportunity to symbolically counteract secessionist tendencies. To rally the American nation behind a common project was supposed to bolster American national unity eight years before the outbreak of the Civil War. The most blatant symbol for this attempt at symbolic nation-building was situated inside the dome that was added to this Crystal Palace version. The dome included 32 stained-glass windows, one with the coat of

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[22] George Foster, *Fifteen Minutes Around New York* (New York: DeWitt & Davenport, 1854), 13.
[23] Quoted in Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 49 (fn. 77).
[24] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 29.
[25] Charles Hirschfeld, "America on Exhibition: The New York Crystal Palace", *American Quarterly* 9.2 (Summer 1957): 106; cf. Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 29.
[26] Ursula Lehmkuhl, "Ein Kristallpalast für New York: Kulturtransfer und nationale Identitätskonstruktion in den USA vor dem Bürgerkrieg", *Zeitschrift des Max-Planck-Instituts für europäische Rechtsgeschichte* 9 (2006): 18, my translation.
[27] Lehmkuhl, "Kristallpalast", 17.
[28] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 28.

arms of the United States and thirty-one devoted to the individual U.S. states each. This symbolical unity is but one indication that nationalism here worked as much outward as it worked inward, and tried to preserve the as yet United States of antebellum America.

Lastly, the New York Crystal Palace did not only have an international and a national, but also a transnational dimension. This has as much to do with the medium as it is related to its host city. Even though New York City in the 1850s was still a far cry from the global metropolises of London and Paris, it was still a fast-growing and ethnically increasingly mixed arena of transnational culture(s). Especially after the establishment of regular transatlantic steamer service and the construction of the Erie Canal, New York City had become the most important node in the Atlantic trade network. In conjunction with transatlantic trade, a "lively commerce of cultures between mid-nineteenth century America and Europe" emerged and increasingly began to question "the idea of contained, national cultures in favor of a more dynamic, transnational picture".[29] In mid-nineteenth-century New York City this transatlantic, transnational culture ranged from the invention of the modern restaurant by Swiss immigrants (Delmonico's) to the first American department store (A.T. Stewart's "Marble Palace"), and from German beer culture (Atlantic Garden and Schaefer's Brewery) to various other transplantations of European popular culture into the New World's port of arrival. When the idea of a Crystal Palace fair travelled across the Atlantic, it became a part of this lively transnational popular culture. However, neither of these transnational transplants were exact copies of an original. Rather, they were varying repetitions of a previous iteration.[30] Enter seriality.

Serial Crystal Palace

On the surface, the New York exhibition was an obviously derivative transposition of the original world's fair held at the Crystal Palace in London. However, in its new national context, it also introduced significant innovations to the form. In contrast to the public-royal organization of the London exhibition, the New York version was private, republican, and overtly entrepreneurial. Second, two years before the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris, it added the element of a distinct fine arts exhibit, something that had been relegated to a rather ornamental function two years earlier.[31] Third, across the street from the fairgrounds,

[29] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 45.

[30] For a detailed account of this aspect of the New York Crystal Palace and an attempt to read it as a transnational adaptation in the context of city mystery literature, see Florian Groß, "(Re-)Making American Culture: The Crystal Palace and the Transnational Series and Adaptations of Antebellum New York City", in *Popular Culture – Serial Culture. Nineteenth-Century Serial Narrative in Transnational Perspective, 1830s-1860s,* ed. Daniel Stein & Lisanna Wiele (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 311-327.

[31] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 45; Greenhalgh, *Fair World*, 27-28. Beyond the content of each individual fair and its separate pavilions and exhibits, it is the form of world's fairs that ultimately gives them meaning. Böger claims that world's fairs are "by nature multi-media events" (15) that combined in ever new fashion visual and information media such as photography, art, and film. In this paper, however, I want to emphasize the fairs' own mediality and the aesthetic and formal principles that are evident through the medium's history between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century.

an anarchic set of booths and concessionaires provided fairgoers with food, beverages, and entertainments such as proto-freak shows and gambling opportunities, thus creating a primitive (and still unofficial) precursor to the midways of later fairs.[32] All of these were grouped around a second spectacular structure, the Latting Observatory. This 300-feet-tall wooden tower, owned and operated by a local businessman and formally independent of the official fair, was the tallest structure in the United States. For the admission price of 25 cents, its three observatory decks gave New Yorkers for the first time the opportunity to get a bird's eye view of their increasingly congested city (Fig. 2).[33]

Therefore, coming back to the New York world's fair in 1939, the sideshow location of that fair's Crystal Palace Musical Revue was fitting insofar as the 1853 fair it was modeled on had introduced the very element of the entertainment section itself.[34] By 1939, it was an established element of world's fairs, most commonly thought to be pioneered by the "Midway Pleasance" during the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893, but in fact introduced in very primitive form 40 years earlier in New York. Writing about world's fair amusement zones in general, Böger argues that "[i]n changing combinations, these were the essential components of each fair".[35] One might argue that these amusement areas and their logic of serially recombined components were introduced in 1853 New York, without being an official part of the actual fairground. They go by many names; within the first 15 years of the 20th century alone, we have "The Pan" in Buffalo (1901), "The Pike" in St. Louis (1904), "The Trail" in Portland (1905), "The Pay Streak" in Seattle (1909), "The Isthmus" in San Diego (1915), and "The Joy Zone" in San Francisco (1915). [36] The overall aesthetics of these entertainment zones changed according to the central theme of the respective fair, and introduced different kinds of entertainment from innocent to prurient. Still, no matter how they posed, they usually retained the kind of 19th century sideshow status from which they originated, something that might also help to explain why they were so often considerably more oriented towards the past than the future.[37]

This combination of blatant repetition and selected variation exemplifies the New York Crystal Palace's most important contribution to the world's fair medium: it introduced the very concepts of continuation and varying repetition to a cultural phenomenon that was initially seen as a singular event.[38] Thus, in a serial pattern of repetition and variation, the American version, together with the simultaneous Dublin Crystal Palace of 1853 and the first Paris Exposition Universelle of 1855, turned the initial singular and localized event into a

[32] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 38.
[33] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 32-33.
[34] According to Greenhalgh, pre-world's fair-exhibitions in France already featured these kinds of unofficial sideshows and entertainment sections. Greenhalgh, *Fair World*, 20.
[35] Böger, *Envisioning the Nation*, 17
[36] Rydell, Findling & Pelle, *Fair America*, 45-71.
[37] Cf. Sarah Wasserman, "The Menace of the New: Mourning 'The World of Tomorrow' at the 1939 New York World's Fair", in *New York, New York! Urban Spaces, Dreamscapes, Contested Territories*, ed. Sabine Sielke (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2016), 72.
[38] Even though fairs and exhibitions were of course already a kind of series before, as Greenhalgh's account of pre-world's fair exhibitions in Europe and the United States shows; Greenhalgh, *Fair World*, 15-26.

series that spanned the world and became one of the most important cultural phenomena of modernity.

To read world's fairs in conjunction with seriality makes sense for three reasons. First, many of the items exhibited were themselves serially produced or integral parts of industrialism's serialized, standardized production regime that emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century, from Colt's revolver to the dyes used for clothes, and from steam engines to sewing machines. World's fairs thus emerged at the same time as serial forms of mass production, and the New York Crystal Palace is one such "fleeting monument to conspicuous consumption" and serial production.[39] Second, a world's fair like the New York Crystal Palace (or rather, its central structure) was itself made out of serial parts. Therefore, already the building itself is an architectural paean to the industrial principle of serial production. Constructed out of prefabricated cast iron frames and glass plates, modern materials and construction techniques that were at the time still uncommon in the United States, the building itself signified tropes that have since become crucial symbolic elements of world's fairs, such as progress, industry, and modernity.[40] This is especially true for Crystal Palace buildings of the first phase of world's fairs, but also applies to later main buildings and pavilions. Third, world's fairs were not only the venues made out of serial parts where mass-produced serial commodities were put on display: the architectural and conceptual principles that defined them were also serial in and of themselves. What the London Crystal Palace did was to pioneer the use of prefabricated, standardized parts to construct an exhibition building. The New York Crystal Palace not only adapted this procedure for its own building, but by doing so, it transformed this act itself into a standardized, serial element of world's fairs itself. Therefore, the serial principle applies here to more than industrial modes of production, as not only the building itself or the type of building were serial in nature, but also the event as such.

To elaborate on this, I want to relate world's fairs to an organization of popular culture along the lines of serial structures of sequence, continuation, and varying repetition. Frank Kelleter and Ruth Mayer have called this "popular seriality" with regard to narrative forms that emerged roughly simultaneously with world's fairs—from mid-19th century serialized novels to early 20th century film serials to midcentury comic books to Netflix view-on-demand series.[41] All of these instances are mass-addressed, long-running, standardized forms of popular culture that depend on a dialectic of variation and repetition and consist of incremental elements in sequential order. And while world's fairs are not narrative forms in the narrow sense, they do in fact function as a medium that has proliferated the national(ist) and capitalist narratives of progress, ideological and racial superiority, and competition – and has done so through a long series of different, yet related segments. Therefore, seriality is a particularly rich way to conceptualize the cultural, political, and commercial work of

[39] Sam Roberts, Sam. "New York's Crystal Palace: A Fleeting Monument to Conspicuous Consumption", *New York Times,* April 27, 2017, online at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/27/arts/design/new-yorks-crystal-palace-a-fleeting-monument-to-conspicuous-consumption.html

[40] Lehmkuhl, "Kristallpalast", 13, 28.

[41] Cf. Florian Groß, "The Future That Was Lost: Newness, Seriality, and the 1939/1940 and 1964/1965 New York World's Fairs", in *Modernities and Modernization in North America*, ed. Ilka Brasch and Ruth Mayer (Heidelberg: Winter, 2018), 307-330, for an application of this approach to the serial relationship between the 1939/40 and the 1964/65 New York World's Fairs.

world's fairs. Yet, this sequential element inherent in world's fair history is only implicitly present in existing accounts of the medium. While terms such as "network" or "tradition" [42] certainly stress the interconnectedness of fairs, they only implicitly hint at the precise formal logic behind these connections.[43] The closest equivalent to a serial reading of world's fairs is proposed in Alexander Geppert's reading of turn-of-the-century world's fairs in Europe. For Geppert, world's fairs need to be read "in relation to one another",[44] and he further claims:

> Particularly if only a single exposition is analyzed, the central significance of transnational and transatlantic entanglements and far-reaching inter-urban competition is necessarily disregarded. Certain qualities and characteristics are attributed to one particular exhibition when they are, effectively, *less a consequence of the local text than a part of the larger rules and grammar governing the whole medium*. Though largely unacknowledged, references between different nationally organized exhibitionary networks proved determinative both in terms of internal organization (design, layout and size of location, for instance) and external organization (sequence, timing, participation)."[45]

Although still reading world's fairs in terms of a "tradition", Geppert's relational take on world's fairs identifies the central creative principle of the medium. Yet, I want to claim that this underlying principle becomes clearer if we regard world's fairs as a series rather than a tradition. Or rather, as a series that encompasses and uses the element of a tradition, but is structurally organized along different lines. While the concept of tradition may lend historical credentials to a new instance in the series, a critical treatment along these lines amounts to a rather conservative, and certainly almost exclusively backward-looking perspective informed by a somewhat rigid opposition of continuation vs. break. But although world's fair practitioners certainly had in mind the history of previous fairs and may have even treated them in terms of a tradition, they always connected this look to the past with an element of novelty, usually in the sense of progress (or, especially in United States in the 1930s, "the future"). This, however, only marginally fits into the notion of tradition, even if we acknowledge the evolving and invented quality of traditions.[46] Moreover, the direct connection to modernity and the development of industrial capitalism also suggests that seriality is a better suited term and concept for this medium.

From the perspective I want to propose here, treating world's fairs as a series both accounts for their recursive form of creativity informed by a dynamic dialectic of variation and repetition as well as their intricate relations to forms of capitalism that are themselves based on serial structures. Characterized by variation and repetition, the sequential unfolding of distinct though related installments, processes of creation informed by competitive

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[42] Rydell, Findling & Pelle, *Fair America*, 1; Greenhalgh, *Fair World*, 13.

[43] For a short account that alludes to the serial nature of world fairs, see Neil Harrris, "American Fairs and Civic Identity", in Civic Visions, World's Fairs (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1993), 7-11.

[44] Alexander Geppert, *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 13.

[45] Geppert, *Fleeting Cities*, 12, my emphasis.

[46] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

juxtaposition, and progression through recursive introspection of its own history, world's fairs constitute a transnational and transmedial series of ephemeral and recurring non-narrative media events in and throughout modernity.

To illustrate this, I want to return once more to the New York World's Fair of 1939/1940. By 1939, the Crystal Palace of 1853/1854 may have become so obscure that a lengthy *Harper's*-portrait of chairman Grover Whalen – even though it was called "Barnum in Modern Dress" – failed to consider the fact that this fair had even taken place when it claimed that "next year New York will open its first world's fair."[47] However, the operators of the Crystal Palace Musical Revue were not the only ones who still remembered the first world's fair in New York City. In an advertising booklet by the Home Insurance Company, produced as a give-away for the fair, a superimposed picture of the 1853 Crystal Palace and Latting Observatory and the 1939 theme center structures Trylon and Perisphere can be found (Fig. 3).[48] Underneath the title "From Fair to Fair on the Fairway of Time", the copy informs of the connections between the insurance company and world's fairs in New York City, but much more importantly, it highlights a structural connection between the two fairs that I claim is relevant for world's fairs in general.

In the introduction to *Delirious New York*, architectural theorist Rem Koolhaas uses this illustration to relate the 1853 New York Crystal Palace and the 1939 "World of Tomorrow" through the fairs' central and most iconic buildings and their formal dialectic between "the needle and the globe".[49] According to Koolhaas, this dialectical relationship is common both to the Crystal Palace and the Latting Observatory of 1853 as well as the Perisphere and Trylon of 1939. In Koolhaas's architectural reading of the Trylon and Perisphere, the two structures' dialectical relationship helps to explain the way how Manhattan's skyline emerged. However, from the perspective I want to propose here, they also embody crucial principles of world's fairs as such. Grover Whalen, the PR-maven and chairman of the 1939 world's fair corporation, described the Trylon and the Perisphere as follows: "We promised the world something new in Fair architecture, and here it is – something radically different and yet fundamentally as old as man's experience".[50] Here, he hints at the basic principle of serial innovation and its negotiation between absolute and relative novelty. In addition to its modernistic surface, the theme center featured an obelisk and a globe, thus combining modern, antique, and universal elements to come up with something new. This combination is also relevant for a second reason. In his account of the world's fair, James Mauro describes the structure as "the grand, skyward-reaching Trylon – the finite; and the endless, floating globe of the Perisphere – the infinite".[51] It is exactly this tension between the finite and the infinite, between the component part and the (potentially limitless) ongoing series that is at the heart of world's fair seriality.

The relation between recurrence, reproduction, and novelty becomes even more apparent if we consider other iconic world's fair structures, such as the Eiffel Tower and the Celestial

[47] Elmer Davis,"Barnum in Modern Dress", *Harper's Magazine,* October 1938, 453.
[48] The Home Insurance Company, *Famous American Homes,* 1939, 5.
[49] Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York: Monacelli, 1994 [1978]), 27.
[50] Quoted in James Mauro, *Twilight at the World of Tomorrow. Genius, Madness, Murder, and the 1939 World's Fair on the Brink of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), 131.
[51] Mauro, *Twilight*, 340.

Globe, constructed for the Paris world's fairs of 1889 and 1900 (Fig. 4). What this illustrates is how world's fairs and their respective ideas and innovations are always already derived from historical, and often transnational, precedent, so that one of the world's most famous national symbols, the Eiffel Tower, owes much of its idea to a wooden novelty structure erected in 1853 New York City – which then in turn re-emerges as a modernistic white obelisk almost 100 years later. Or, for that matter, as the central structure of the 1894 Midwinter Fair in San Francisco, the 266-feet-tall Electric Tower, whose three observation decks and steel frame architecture peculiarly echoed both the more recent Eiffel Tower and their shared distant predecessor in New York City. This does not make the Eiffel Tower, the Electric Tower, or the Trylon inferior derivations of any given superior original, just as much as the New York Crystal Palace was not merely an uncreative copy of the London exhibition. Rather, it prompts us to make sense of world's fairs by viewing them as inherently serial in nature. Seriality is the structural *and* transnational principle organizing world's fairs: a dialectic of variation and repetition, the sequential unfolding of distinct though related installments, creation through competition, and progression through recursive introspection of the medium's own history.

This also entails that it is necessary to question or at least qualify Romantic notions of originality in relation to this medium. The fundamental principle I am describing here was not yet established with the "original" Crystal Palace in London, but only emerged with the first "copy" or "version" that opened its gates two years later on another continent. Therefore, one of the most creative principles of world's fairs, that of varying repetition, was introduced in New York City. Thus, from the point of view I want to propose here, world's fair historiography does not necessarily have to start with the London Crystal Palace of 1851, as it so routinely does. Rather, in a sense, the history of world's fairs as a serial medium only began with the second fair, the New York Crystal Palace. Of course, the London Exhibition itself was nothing sui generis, as national exhibitions in France and Great Britain as well the American Institute Fairs had already existed before the 1850s.[52] The London Crystal Palace might be considered the first episode in this long-running series that introduced the element of international participation. Its transnational aesthetic of varying repetitions was tested in its mid-1850s versions, before an initial idiom was eventually consolidated in Paris. While all of the Crystal Palace sequels before 1855 are commonly considered as outliers and kind-of-prequels in the proper sequence of major world's fairs, they are nevertheless crucial in understanding central elements and dynamics in the world's fair medium. As a matter of fact, within this trajectory of ever-changing repetitions of staple elements, the concept of an "original" hardly makes sense. The New York Crystal Palace's status as an iterative version of a previous installment as well as several of the elements taken over, adapted, or changed in relation to the first world's fair in London make it—together with the even more obscure Dublin Crystal Palace exhibition of 1853—the true origin point of world's fairs as a transnational series of events.

Conclusion

[52] Greenhalgh, *Fair World*, 15-26, and Leerssen's chapter in this volume.

In this short account of the first American world's fair, my aim was not to rewrite world's fair history by claiming that the New York Crystal Palace should be reconsidered as a central event, on a par with the early European fairs. I do, however, argue that there is a lot to learn from the aesthetic and pragmatic choices that were made in order to transfer the concept of an international Crystal Palace exhibition from London to New York City. While Greenhalgh rightly divides the history of world's fairs into British, French, and American lineages to approach the form's variations, I want to emphasize that the New York Crystal Palace illustrates how the world's fair series inherently problematizes such neat national allocations. For all its ingrained nationalist propaganda, this hybrid, mongrel form always carries transnational vestiges *and* potentials in its design.

Many contemporary and later critics have described the New York Crystal Palace as a failure both in terms of nationalist and capitalist outcomes; but its historical relevance goes beyond direct effects. Next to providing us with a window into the construction of American national identity in mid-nineteenth century, it primarily helps us to better understand the beginning of the transnational serial form of the world's fair and the structural principle that generated all of the later instances that are covered in this volume. Even though individual world's fairs proclaim to be distinct events in distinct national settings, they are part of a larger sequence formally organized by serial instances of varying repetition within a transnational exhibition culture. World's fairs are always simultaneously backward- and forward-looking, and no matter how extreme their proclamation of progress and the future may be, they are always also steeped in the medium's past. In a serial dynamic of varying repetition, world's fairs depend on the iterative creation of ever-new versions of a basic formula that, established and popularized in 1851 in London and made serial two years later in New York, has been the foundation of a transnational phenomenon that has spanned – and helped define – modernity.

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