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INTERVIEW WITH ALLAN KATZ

BY

SAUNDRA L. GROVES

ABSTRACT

Allen Katz is a reporter for The Times-Picayune/The States-Item, a daily newspaper in New Orleans and the largest paper in Louisiana. He was involved in the coverage of the 1984 Louisiana Exposition from 1981 until its conclusion and is still writing about the aftermath of the Fair.

ROLE OF THE NEWS MEDIA

QUESTION 1: Based on your personal observations, what are the fundamental characteristics of world's fairs and what will they be like in the future?

ANSWER: The Louisiana Exposition, the Fair in Knoxville and the Fairs in Seattle, Spokane and San Antonio were what I call vest-pocket fairs. They were sponsored by local businesses and were essentially small-scale urban renewal projects, compared to the 1985 and 1986 Fairs being held in Japan and Canada, financed by national governments, and intended to achieve large scale results. Because of the impact of television and the rise of permanent expositions like EPCOT and Disneyland, vest-pocket fairs are almost certainly becoming obsolete. Even the large fairs sponsored by national governments may be on their way out. Fairs have never been money-makers. In New Orleans, the Fair was a large money-loser. And, most important, fairs may no longer be the most effective way of achieving urban renewal--changing land uses and land values. Providing tax incentives or industrial revenue bonds for developers may now be a more cost-effective way of changing a decaying riverfront from outmoded maritime uses to a tourist-oriented, revitalized and renovated neighborhood that attracts capital for construction of hotels, office buildings, apartments and retail outlets.

QUESTION 2: What is the role of the print media in covering an event like a world's fair?

ANSWER: In New Orleans, the print media set the agenda for television and radio. Local print media also helped set the agenda for national print and electronic media covering the Fair. Because print has more space and because the electronic media have so few minutes to devote to any given story, the newspaper becomes the vehicle for most analysis and investigative efforts.

QUESTION 3: What was the position of The Times-Picayune/The States-Item regarding the Louisiana Exposition?

ANSWER: The newspaper tried to objectively cover the Fair like any other event. This upset some readers--both within and outside of the Fair's official family--who felt the newspaper should have been a booster of the Fair. In every other U.S. city that has had a fair, the largest local newspaper has backed the local exposition. Often, publishers have been included on the board of the exposition. In New Orleans, that was not the case. There are no firm and fast rules that govern how a newspaper should view a proposed or an actual fair. The only certainty is that whatever role the newspaper takes, it will be controversial. Because the Louisiana Exposition had so many problems, some viewed the newspaper's coverage of the Fair as negative.

QUESTION 4: What was the impact of the national media on the Fair?

ANSWER: The coverage of the Fair's many problems by the national media probably had a devastating effect on the attendance. The stories about the Fair's problems did not deter attendance by New Orleanians who enjoyed the event, but it certainly discouraged potential visitors from outside Louisiana. However, a related factor that discouraged out-of-state visitors was that the Fair's management spent most of their funds developing the site and had little money left for a marketing program. Given the paucity of advertising for the Fair and the negative tone of national stories about the Fair's many problems, it is likely many potential visitors decided to skip the Fair and see New Orleans some other time.

QUESTION 5: What would you recommend to individuals who are planning to stage an exposition in their community?

ANSWER: Raise a lot of money and do not harbor any illusions that a world's fair breaks even or makes a profit. Fairs lose money. Their benefit is the creation of residuals that change land values and land uses in a positive way. Rather than stage an exposition, a community would be well-advised to consider other alternative methods of upgrading a target area. For example, the city of Baltimore has achieved the residuals that a fair might produce (with none of the problems that a fair brings) with the development of the Inner Harbor project and the related construction of an aquarium. There was a time when an exposition might have been the best way to achieve these ends. Today, a more effective way of reaching these goals might be cooperation between local and state governments with private developers like the Rouse Corporation or various other entrepreneurs.

QUESTION 6: What do you see as the residual benefits of the Louisiana Exposition?

ANSWER: A new convention center that would have been built had there not been a fair has become an anchor for the development of a new riverfront that is tied to retail and residential development rather than the maritime industry. The creation of a riverfront shopping center located in old wharves--that might also have been accomplished without a fair--will help achieve changes in land uses and land values.

Proponents of the exposition say that it speeded redevelopment of the riverfront by a decade. In retrospect, the question is whether the \$150 million in fair-related losses and bankruptcies of companies that were involved in the Fair is too heavy a price to be paid for hastening the pace of redeveloping the riverfront.

QUESTION 7: What has been the residual impact of the Fair upon New Orleans?

ANSWER: New Orleans has survived Indian wars, swamp mosquitoes, yellow fever epidemics, floods, hurricanes, malaria, occupation by Union troops during the Civil War, depressions and recessions. It will also survive the Louisiana Exposition. In fact, the exposition was a wonderful party enjoyed by the overwhelming majority of the seven million persons who attended. The Fair also speeded the redevelopment of the riverfront, a worthy task that the city badly needed to get on with. Whether a fair was a cost-effective and useful way of channeling the community's energies is another matter. Over the long haul, the residuals that are generated by the Fair will serve New Orleans well and are certain to enhance the city. But that is not necessarily the same as saying that a fair is the best way to achieve these goals. Given perfect hindsight, it is easy to see now that the tensions, financial problems and other difficulties that the Fair generated were probably a steeper price than the city might have been willing to pay, had it known in advance just how difficult an experience the Fair would be.

The real lesson of the Louisiana Exposition is that vest-pocket fairs are outmoded and so expensive that only a national government should undertake these projects. If my advice were sought, I would recommend that communities similar to New Orleans find mechanisms other than expositions to promote themselves and rejuvenate underdeveloped neighborhoods.