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Peter Feldman

University of Pennsylvania, feldmanp@sas.upenn.edu

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Unity in Identity, Disunity in Execution: Expressions of French National Identity at the 1937 Paris World's Fair

Abstract

The 1937 Paris World's Fair was a celebration of "peace" and "progress" at time when the continent was about to descend into total war. In this era of feuding ideologies and hyper-competitive nationalism, France's attempt to project an idealized national identity fell scattered. A closer examination of three examples of French architecture—the Palais de Chaillot, the Regional Pavilions, and the Pavilion de Temps Nouveaux—illustrate that this idealized portrayal of unity was undermined by the execution of the buildings themselves. The result was a much more accurate picture of the country during the inter-war period.

Keywords

France, Architecture, World's Fair, Humanities, History, Kristen Stromberg Childers, Stromberg Childers, Kristen

“Unity in Identity, Disunity in Execution: Expressions of French National Identity at the
1937 Paris World’s Fair”

Peter Feldman

Professor Kristen Stromberg Childers

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In the summer of 1937, the eyes of Europe and the wider world turned their gaze toward Paris, France for the World's Fair. While participating visiting countries were commissioned a limited space to construct their own national pavilions, France, in an unique position as the host country, was not limited to a single expression of an idealized national identity. Instead, French fair planners constructed pavilions not only for every region, but also for "every conceivable French trade and industry,"¹ thereby raising an important question in the process: how could France expect to put forth a single, unified image of national identity? By examining three examples of French architecture at the Fair—the Palais de Chaillot, the Regional Pavilions, and the Pavilion de Temps Nouveaux—one sees a consistent theme emerge: oftentimes the idealized intentions of the buildings and planners were undermined by their very execution. As a result, France was left not with a unified projection of identity, but a scattered, diverse attempt that in actuality was much more reflective of the country as a whole during the inter-war period.

Before delving into the analysis of the buildings, it is important to get a better understanding of the fair itself. The 1937 Paris International Exposition, or the Fair of Modern Arts and Technics as it was officially known, was truly a great undertaking for the host country of France. The exposition officially opened its doors to visitors on May 24, 1937, despite countless missed deadlines and even a brief cancellation in 1934.² Thematically, the fair aimed to follow in the tradition of previous World's Fairs by exploring the notions of "peace and progress,"³ yet it was hard to lose sight of the grim European picture of the time. Though Europe seemed to have regained its footing

¹ Ihor Junyk, "The Face of the Nation: State Fetishism and Métissage at the Exposition Internationale, Paris 1937," *Grey Room*, No. 23 (Spring 2006), 99.

² Shanny Peer, *France on Display: Peasants, Provincials, and Folklore in the 1937 Paris World's Fair*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 24, 40.

³ Arthur Chandler, "Paris, 1937," in *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 286.

economically following the depression, the last two years saw Mussolini and Italy invade Ethiopia, Franco gaining power in Spain, and Hitler leading a suddenly aggressive and resurgent Germany. Furthermore, the continent seemed to be quite divided ideologically as Communism in the Soviet Union and Fascism in Germany and Italy each seemed to be making a case against traditional liberal democracy. Despite the exposition's relative grandeur and success—the fair received over 31 million visitors and a relative economic profit was gleaned for the host country⁴—no one could mistake the grim image that seemed to dominate the fair: the contrasting German and Soviet Pavilions, each built directly across from each other on the fair's main plaza, the Champs de Mars. In what has become one of the fair's great tales, the German Architect, Albert Speer, had mistakenly stumbled upon the plans for the Soviet Pavilion prior to construction, and subsequently engineered a response. Thus the vaulting Soviet pavilion that propelled a Soviet working couple progressively into the sky was met by the taller, solid German tower in which a swastika-bearing eagle “looked down on the Russian sculptures.”⁵ If a visitor to the fair were to climb the hill of the recently constructed Palais de Chaillot and look down upon the Champs de Mars, he would have seen the unmistakable Eiffel Tower rising up to the sky between the gaze of these two feuding pavilions. It was in this environment that France attempted to define itself to both its citizens and the world.

Although the theme of the fair focused on “peace and progress,” few failed to see the various international pavilions' true significance—they were constructs of national identity and embodiments of propaganda. Traditionally, World's Fairs primarily showcased new technologies and commodities, but in the modern age of growing nationalism and competing ideologies, these “expositions had shifted from displays of

⁴ Ibid., 288-9.

⁵ Peer, 45.

commercial ware to the display and propagandizing of separate nations as collective entities.”⁶ By 1937, this transformation was more than complete, causing one New York Times reporter to remark, “For the first time so blatantly the national pavilions are conceived and executed as ‘national projections.’”⁷ In this ultra-competitive environment where appearances were everything, even the exterior of the buildings themselves became intertwined in the national image of a country, becoming anthropomorphic symbols of each nation. Thus, “these pavilions were presented not merely as reflections of national character but as living, breathing national characters” as well.⁸

No building perhaps better exemplifies France’s “breathing national character” projected to the world than the Palais de Chaillot, which was built on the Old Trocadéro hill overlooking the Champs de Mars. But to understand what the Palais de Chaillot represented, one must gain a better understanding of the building it was erected to replace: the Trocadéro. Originally built as a palace for the 1878 World’s Fair, the Trocadéro was designed with Persian and Byzantine aspects. The building’s main feature was its two minarets that symmetrically emerged over a large rotunda that opened up onto fountains and a garden. However, the building was never really liked by French critics as they focused on its “Moorish” features and compared its façade in one instance to looking like the face of an ass.⁹ It was exceedingly foreign, and simply, not French during a time when the social climate was beginning to question these elements. This growing xenophobia, caused in part by the influx of refugees into the country during the interwar years, saw a rise of anti-foreign legislation, such as an August 1932 law that

⁶ Junyk, 108.

⁷ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., “Paris, 1937: Foreign Pavilion,” *Architectural Forum* (September 1937), 174.

⁸ Junyk, 98.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

limited the number of foreigners that could practice certain professions.¹⁰ These criticisms of the building, supported by the xenophobic social climate, only increased as the 1937 World's Fair approached.¹¹ When it was finally destroyed, one critic noted the old structure would be “mourned, but only by those who habitually mourn the dead.”¹² As one historian succinctly put, “[a]t a time when the very notion of Frenchness was perceived to be under threat, the use of a “Moorish” building to represent France in the eyes of the world...would generate tremendous anxieties.”¹³ It was clear that something else was needed as the centerpiece of France' projected identity.

Thus the Palais de Chaillot was designed to be everything the Trocadéro was not—classic, traditional, and French. The space where the old Trocadéro occupied was left as an empty green. On either side of the green extended two symmetrical colonnades acting almost like arms in extending and embracing the Champs de Mars. Whereas the old Trocadéro housed artifacts and art from foreign locales such as Africa, the new Palais de Chaillot included a new museum, the Musee del'Homme, which was dedicated to science.¹⁴ Critics of building responded quite positively, noting “the difficult task” the architects faced by replacing the former structure.¹⁵ One critic lauded its “superb” “clear white surfaces” and the ability of its wings “to somehow hold and bind into one harmonious picture the extremely varied national buildings between,”¹⁶ while critics and citizens alike loved the view it provided looking down the Champs de Mars, perhaps relishing the symbolic feeling of being on top of the hill looking down triumphantly at all

¹⁰ Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 104-5.

¹¹ Junyk, 108.

¹² “1937 International Exposition,” *Architectural Record*, 82 (October 1937), 82.

¹³ Junyk, 109.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 108-110.

¹⁵ *Architectural Record*, 82.

¹⁶ T. F. Hamlin, “Paris, 1937: a Critique,” *American Architect*, (November 1937), 25.

of Europe.¹⁷ It is quite clear, then, the message that the new Palais de Chaillot seemed to be sending. Rejecting the foreign elements of the Trocadéro, the new structure espoused order, tradition, and a resurgent, powerful France.

Yet despite the support shown for this idealized image of France, a closer look reveals a different story. In the case of the Palais de Chaillot, the execution of the building seemed to undermine its message. Firstly, how iconic of France was the building's design? Depending on one's perspective, the Palais de Chaillot's "embracing arms" could also be seen as aggressive and clutching, suggesting a more militant theme similar to the one espoused by the Germans. In fact, the symmetrical and orderly classicism embraced by the French architects was also employed by Albert Speer in designing the German pavilion. While the two pavilions were certainly not identical—Speer's building admittedly had "more muscle"¹⁸ than other buildings—one could not help but get the sense that the French designers felt they needed to project an equally strong and traditional message amidst the "state fetishism"¹⁹ of the exposition. There is certainly evidence to support this view as appeals for budget increases early in the planning process were approved by the parliament in light of the competition posed by incoming foreign propaganda : "We know that other countries have been working for more than two years to turn the exposition to their own advantage...We want this exposition to be such that our country gets the greatest benefit from this huge economic effort."²⁰ Thus, the designers' concern for projecting an equally strong image in competition brings into question the exact "Frenchness" of the pavilion—if the Palace de

¹⁷ Junyk, 111-2.

¹⁸ Ibid., 102.

¹⁹ Ibid., 99-102.

²⁰ Peer, 28.

Chaillot was not Totalitarian architecture, it might have aspired to have been Totalitarian architecture.

Another aspect of the flawed execution of the Palais de Chaillot undermines the building's response to its predecessor, the Trocadéro. The foreign, or "Moorish," elements of the old building were supposed to be rejected in design by the classicism of the new building, yet budget and timetable concerns made it difficult for the construction team to entirely demolish the old structure. As a solution, parts of the colonnade wings were actually kept, given a new façade, and incorporated into the new building's design.²¹ So while aesthetically the Palais de Chaillot seemed to reflect the xenophobic social climate of the time, in execution, its message only went surface deep. One could even argue that the building actually became more accurate in its depiction of France through this duplicity—both the country and the building were comprised in part by efforts to cover up and shun foreign elements that were more a part of the foundation than most cared to recognize.

A second element of France's projection of identity at the 1937 Exposition can be found in the Regional Pavilions. At this section of the fair, every region of France had constructed its own unique pavilion highlighting that region's culture and products, which was monitored and administrated by the centralized Regional Commission.²² Much like the colonial exposition in 1931, where visitors could tour the far reaches of the French empire, visitors were able to tour "the country" of France and gain a greater understanding of not only its diversity but its artisanship as well. Edmond Labbé, the chief planner of the fair, saw the emphasis of hand made products as a response to mass industrialization and centralization which often removed the human touch from the

²¹ Junyk, 113.

²² Peer, 66.

assembly line: “The machine has unified forms and made all products alike. But the human hand is not the same everywhere. The touch of the potter’s thumb...in Provence is altogether different from that of his fellow potter in Normandy or Brittany.”²³ Quality and uniqueness, not mechanization and mass production, were the key themes for the regional pavilion and this emphasis seemed to fit in with a larger rejection of the impersonal, sterile, and uniform modern world.

Taking a look at the interwar period, it is not hard to see where the themes of regionalism took hold. Following the devastation of World War I, many in France called into question the system and values that led their country down this devastating path. A return to the land and the idealized peasant became key themes of this period²⁴, yet the regionalism that planners hope to showcase at the Exposition would have a more modern touch. Charles LeTrosne, at one time the chief architect for the fair, saw the Regional Pavilion as a medium to blend traditional values with modernity: “Regionalism is nothing but the adaptation of modern architecture to the land where it develops.”²⁵ In planning, the Regional Commission had hoped to project this modern regionalism along with the other main theme of the Pavilions, “unity through diversity,” presenting in essence a traditional yet modernist and unified France.

But would French planners be able to organize and synthesize these idealistic themes into reality? Once again, it seems the execution undermined their intentions. Firstly, the planners’ ideal of quality workmanship emblematic of the regions resulted in flaring up the already existing tensions between Paris and the regions. The Regional Commission sponsored a policy of *artisanat dirige*, which in effect was a guideline that

²³ Ibid., 53.

²⁴ Jackson, 29-30.

²⁵ Peer, 64.

artisans had to follow in making their crafts, yet it carried an unmistakable air of falseness to it—artisans were required to copy models and follow directions of regional artists now living in Paris.²⁶ Gone was any organic process to the creation of art. The justification of this program was mostly the fast approaching deadline of the fair—“what we need to do, in effect, is to provoke an evolution which would have taken ten years to happen on its own,” said one Parisian authority.²⁷ Predictably, cries of protest soon flared up from the regional artists over such “Parisian interventionism,” as once again the interests of the capital seemed to outweigh the rest of the country.²⁸ This tension was also exacerbated by how the Regional Commission actually went about grouping the regions into pavilions. Regions such as the Basque requested that they be placed physically next to the Spanish pavilion, and small towns and cities near dominate metropolises such as Lyon or Marseilles requested to be detached. Both requests were rejected, prompting a Basque delegate to say, “They ask us what sauce we want to be fried in. Our answer is that we want to make our own sauce.”²⁹ Overall, it seemed the regions’ ideas were continually squelched in favor of the centralized (and Parisian) committee’s vision. Was this unity through diversity?

Even yet another issue undermining the intended themes arose from budgetary problems. The key question of ‘who was going to foot the bill?’ forced regional artisans and fair planners alike to make compromises. Many were dismayed that France had subsidized most of the foreign pavilions, yet left it up to the regions themselves to come up with the funds for their own pavilions.³⁰ Thus, many mechanized industries were

²⁶ Ibid., 88.

²⁷ Ibid., 88.

²⁸ Ibid., 90-1.

²⁹ Ibid., 76.

³⁰ Ibid., 85.

forced into providing support for pavilions which they doubted would even benefit their regions financially, like in Normandy, where members of the Chamber of Commerce saw the Exposition itself as competition for attracting commerce to their region.³¹ What emerged was a paradox in which “the industries with enough capital to support the regional exhibits financially were the very ones that the Commission did not want displayed at the Regional Centre.”³² Artisanry, in a sense, got the glory while industry paid the bill. Here, it seems the execution of the Regional Pavilions revealed a country still struggling financially from the Great Depression, thus compromising its idealistic vision of promoting artisanship.

Turning now to one final piece of France’s attempt to project a national image, we come across the strange case of Le Corbusier’s Pavilion de Temps Nouveaux. Unlike the Palais de Chaillot and the Regional Center, Le Corbusier’s Pavilion seemingly did not receive the full-fledged support of fair planners, as his idea was relegated to a canvas tent erected on the outskirts of the fair. This came as a shock to many for Le Corbusier was one of France’s most prominent architects, renowned for his pioneering work of the modernist style.³³ The exterior of the Pavilion de Temps Nouveaux itself was made of canvas, erected in a rectangular fashion, and tinted on the outside in the familiar hue of the French tri-colors. Inside, the pavilion housed Le Corbusier’s “program,” his modernist vision of utopian rural and urban planning.³⁴ Criticism seemed to be mixed on the project. Some critics could not get over the fact that Le Corbusier had not constructed

³¹ Elise Marie Moentmann, “The Search for French Identity in the Regions: National Versus Local Visions of France in the 1930’s,” *French History*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2003), 315-6.

³² *Ibid.*, 316.

³³ Jackson, 30.

³⁴ Peer, 129 and Denilo Udovicki Selb, “Le Corbusier and the Paris Exhibition of 1937,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Mar., 1997), 54-8.

a building, but a mere canvas tent, remarking, “this was not Architecture.”³⁵ Another critic looked favorably on the vision Le Corbusier housed within the Pavilion, but perhaps taking a cue from the lack of permanent structure, noted Le Corbusier’s ideas “seemed far from realization in France.”³⁶ Yet others saw Le Corbusier’s vision as innately unique, calling it “the most exciting, convincing, and most easily remembered exhibits of 1937 Paris,”³⁷ and noting that “nothing could be more pertinent.”³⁸ Whatever one thought of Le Corbusier’s Pavilion, however, no one could deny its subtle and understated effectiveness in contrast to the dominant, flamboyant national pavilions.

If there is one theme that dominated Le Corbusier’s Pavilion, it was most definitely modernism. Le Corbusier prided himself on being on the cutting edge, and during the 1930’s, he saw French architecture as cluttered, stagnant, fixated on the past: “The house is cluttered with garbage. We must clean, sweep, throw into the trash. Let’s wake up lethargic societies. Shake off the torpor. Act.”³⁹ But how would this desire to “wake up” French society fit in with the planners’ theme of blending modernism and tradition? If anything, Le Corbusier’s vision seemed too extreme. He called for modernism. The planners called for tempered modernism. Thus, many historians have seen Le Corbusier’s tent as proof of the planners’ rejection of his vision for France.⁴⁰

However, recent scholarship has refuted this popular myth. It seems Le Corbusier’s Pavilion was plagued not solely by stubborn fair leadership, but by constantly changing plans, lack of funding, and missed deadlines that were more Le

³⁵ Udovicki-Selb, 56.

³⁶ Hitchcock, Jr., 160.

³⁷ *Architectural Record*, 83.

³⁸ Elizabeth Mock, “The Paris Exposition,” *Magazine of Art* (May 1937), 272.

³⁹ Peer, 129.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

Corbusier's fault than anyone.⁴¹ Le Corbusier not only helped propagate the myth that absolved him of any blame, but he was so focused on the "program" housed inside the Pavilion (meant to be a preview for a 1941 follow up project he was working on), that much of the design of the building actually fell to his cousin, Jeanneret.⁴² And despite calls from American critics for this mobile work of architecture to be brought on display in New York,⁴³ Le Corbusier's tent never was re-erected in other countries as was originally planned. A variety of factors, including the war, the occupation of France, and artistic doubts by the architect himself, stalled any continuation of Le Corbusier's "program."⁴⁴ What began as an opportunity for one of France's most acclaimed architects to showcase his talent to the world materialized into an intriguing yet marginalized Pavilion that never saw the expansion it sought after the Fair's end. With "the debacle" just two years away, the modern observer cannot help but to see Le Corbusier's impermanent and collapsible structure as more emblematic of France than the dominant Palais de Chaillot.

France's challenge of projecting a unified national identity may have indeed revealed more about the country than the final results. What was this "exposed" identity? On one hand, a changing social climate in the interwar period that espoused tradition and regionalism and abhorred foreign elements was manifested in the construction of both the Regional pavilions and the Palais de Chaillot. While these "conservative" elements certainly did not dominate French government during the interwar years, especially during the reign of the Popular Front, they became the foundation for a later resurgence within the National Revolution and the Vichy Regime. Financial instability was also

⁴¹ Udovicki-Selb, 42-63.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴³ Mock, 272.

⁴⁴ Udovicki-Selb, 56-8.

apart of this identity, as feuding over funding and missed deadlines revealed a country that had not quite recovered from the depths of the Great Depression. But perhaps most importantly, the exposition revealed a country that was much too diverse and divided for one unified identity. Despite preaching a tempered blend of modernism and tradition, the fair planners' efforts produced results that were all over the map. On one end, the Palais de Chaillot projected classicism and traditional power, while on the other end, Le Corbusier's Pavilion de Temps Nouveaux put forth an understated yet temporary vision of modernism. Furthermore, regional feuding—especially over the “Parisian interventionism” of the centralized Regional Commission and the funding discrepancies between artisans and industry—made the Regional Pavilions' theme of “unity through diversity” look more like “diversity over unity.” This scattered projection of identity, and its cause, was not lost on one American critic, Elizabeth Mock. While expounding on the perfect or idealized World's Fair, one in which central planning was balanced with the interests of culture, critics, and industry, she notes: “In sober fact, such a project would require a unity of intention, if not conviction, that would be impossible in present-day Paris. The exposition contains in miniature all the tensions of French society, and the resultant form must in the end be accepted as inevitable.”⁴⁵

Returning back to our spot in front of the Palais de Chaillot looking down the Champs de Mars, we come across once again the iconic image of the fair—the Eiffel Tower emerging over the fair's main plaza, flanked on either side by the German and Soviet Pavilions engaged in ideological and architectural warfare. It is in this image that one can fully grasp the context of France's diverse and scattered identity during the latter

⁴⁵ Mock, 267.

part of the inter-war period: not on the left, nor on the right, but lost and muddled in the grey area in between.

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