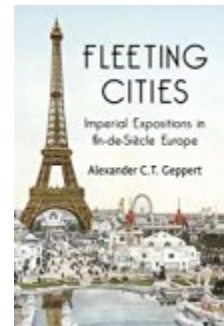


Alexander C. T. Geppert. *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 398 S. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-22164-2.

Reviewed by Jill Steward (School of Historical Studies, Newcastle University)

Published on H-Urban (March, 2012)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari



Laboratories for Scrutinizing Modernity: Imperial Exhibitions

The great world and imperial exhibitions of the second half of the nineteenth century, sometimes described as one of the era's most distinctive products, were made possible by innovative technologies in transport, building, and communication and given the oxygen of publicity by the world's media industries. An urban phenomenon, they were visible signs of the transnational mobility of people, goods, and information made possible by technical innovation, industrial development, and commercial enterprise. Supported by the press, they contributed to the dissemination of knowledge and information across national boundaries and encouraged economic and cultural transfers. They made an enormous contribution to the growth of urban tourism and the spread of new and distinctively modern forms of visual culture and mass entertainment. It is not surprising therefore, that exhibitions could be seen not only as indications of modernity, but also its catalysts and agents.

As we contemplate the intense media excitement aroused by the mega-events of our own time, notably the Olympic Games (which were merely sideshows at the 1900 Exhibition Universelle in Paris and the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition), we can understand the impact made by their nineteenth-century predecessors on the public imagination by the "fleeting cities" of the title of Alexander Geppert's study of imperial exhibitions, an allusion to Baudelaire's characterization of modernity as a set of representational practices embracing "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent," which involved the temporary occupation of acres of urban space and necessitated ad-

justments to the infrastructure of the host city (p. 3). They attracted thousands of visitors and provided a massive stimulus to the growth of urban tourism, despite which the cost often proved a severe strain on the economic resources of the hosts as, for example, in the case of the financially disastrous 1873 Vienna International Exhibition. As showcases for the host cities, exhibitions also played an important role in the construction of city images, a point not lost on Kaiser Wilhelm II, who refused permission for his capital city to stage an international exhibition since "Berlin is not Paris, Paris is the great whorehouse of the world; therein lies its attraction independent of any exhibition. There is nothing in Berlin that can captivate the foreigner, except a few museums, castles and soldiers" (p. 34).

For urban historians, ethnologists, art and design historians, and many other scholars, exhibition studies opens up a rich source of material relating to a wide range of themes. Not surprisingly, there is an extensive literature associated with the field, much of which is listed in the useful bibliography of Geppert's study, which originated in his PhD dissertation, completed in 2004. His starting point is Georg Simmel's essay of 1896 (the original German version [and a translation] is included as an appendix), which was prompted by a close inspection of the 1896 Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung (Berlin Trade Fair Exhibition). By concentrating the "world" in one place, the exhibition served as a basis for a scrutiny of modern culture and its inherent characteristics and contradictions. Typically, this event was characterized by the het-

erogeneity of its contents, which ranged from displays of Germany's industrial and technological prowess to a reconstruction of *Alt Berlin* and an extremely popular *Kolonialausstellung*. But, for Simmel, a sense of unity was imparted to its disparate contents and the "shop-window quality of things" by the air of amusement which pervaded the site. It was this that prompts Geppert to read the exhibition as a site for "an investigation into the visualized consumer culture and the condensed urban spaces that he considered as at once condition and consequence of current globalising processes as well as pivotal to the very modernity that global capitalism depended upon for its universalising effects" (p. 2).

As Geppert explains in his introduction, it is this insight which prompts his investigation into the nature and function of exhibitions, the overall rationale and methodology of which is designed to contribute to a theory of exhibitions, based on the premise that these phenomena should not be viewed in isolation from one another but rather be perceived as the constituent elements of a medium which operates across transnational boundaries. As such, in the manner of their conception, organization, realization, and reception, they exemplify the effects of the new "interconnectedness" of space and place and the universalizing forces of modernity. Exhibitions, which Geppert likens to "knots in a worldwide web," should therefore be positioned not within an "exhibitionary complex,"[1] a concept which lacks a historical dimension, but within the framework of an "exhibitionary network" extending across and through time, and which is operative at local, national, and global levels. Accordingly, exhibitions perform a range of different functions. At one level, for example, they can be conceptualized as "meta-media," as a specific mode of communication that encompasses and incorporates other communicative technologies in a way that opens up questions of "medialization, visualization, and virtualization" (p. 3). At another level they function as vehicles for the promotion of a variety of local and national interests and agendas.

This ambitious project is carried out through an investigation into a set of case studies consisting of five exhibitions staged in three metropolitan cities, Berlin, London, and Paris, all of which were imperial capitals. Chosen as "exemplars" and deliberately varied in type, scope, and character, these exhibitions cover the period from 1896 to 1931, thus extending the usual periodization of the fin-de-siècle of the book's title, the reason for which becomes clearer as we are taken through succeeding chapters. The opening chapter focuses on the 1896

Berlin Trade Fair Exhibition (which, coincidentally, was also the year of the first Olympic Games), followed by a world exhibition, the Exposition Universelle held in 1900 in Paris (generally taken as the high-point of the genre); a binational exhibition, the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition held in London, and two post-World War One colonial exhibitions, the first of which was the 1924-25 British Empire Exhibition, held in the London suburb of Wembley, and the second, the 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale, staged in the Parisian suburb of Vincennes. These provide Geppert with a wealth of empirical data with which to demonstrate that changes in the nature and functions of the exhibition medium can be identified through an analysis of the context, organization, visual and spatial form and content, and the public debates associated with these "interconnected exemplars of urban modernity" which, despite their common features, are also distinguished by their own special problems and internal dynamics (p. 3). At the same time, the shifts in the meanings assigned to their imperial and colonial contents are mapped onto changes in the context in which these exhibitions are staged.

One of the many strengths of this study is the use of an impressive range of contemporary sources. Individual exhibitions constitute dense textures, requiring close reading techniques and visual and spatial analysis to discover how they functioned internally, and interacted with specific physical and cultural environments. Geppert draws on a wealth of empirical detail as he contextualizes the initial conception of the exhibitions and the process of realization, showing the way they were influenced by economic and political developments, the agendas and interventions of particular interest groups, and cultural transfers and appropriation. Particularly important are the many intertextual and transnational references which bind the separate chapters together and illustrate the way that discussions of aims and objectives, planning decisions, and criticisms were shaped by awareness of preceding, contemporaneous, and planned exhibitions which provided interested parties, organizers, and commentators with points of reference and inspiration, as well as models for the use of particular elements, as in the case of the nostalgic reconstruction of *Alt Berlin* and the exotic and touristic *Rue du Kairo* in the Berlin Trade Exhibition.

As the book's chapters demonstrate, exhibition organization is a complex process involving a multitude of practical initiatives and decisions, raising questions about the particular individuals who were involved in key negotiations over sites, or who were responsible for

collecting the items, assembling the displays, deciding on the overall design, orchestrating important vistas and dealing with the all-important question of what should be the *clou*, the key monument of the event, of which outstanding precedents were the Crystal Palace of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the Eiffel Tower (1889). Equally important questions have to be asked about sources of finance and the respective roles of private and public organizations and institutions: in Paris, for example, the state played a central role, whereas in Berlin and London, it was the private organizations, particularly trade associations, which were the driving forces behind the organization and financing of these events. Decisions about the design of an exhibition, its layout (the book includes a number of helpful ground plans), and visual impact were mediated by the contingencies of the site.

Apart from the nature of the press coverage (which was often assisted by handouts), rather more difficult to establish is the question of how exhibitions were actually received, how they were perceived and consumed by their different audiences of communities and individuals at local, national, and global levels, although this is important as a means of gauging the extent to which they achieved their official objectives. Finally, there is the question of their impact on the medium itself, on the surrounding urban fabric, and on the lives of visitors and participants. It is through a painstaking investigation of these questions, emphasizing the underlying issues of space and time, that Geppert builds up a picture of a medium in decline as he carefully unravels the history of each event, focusing on the method of execution, the public debates it engendered, and the key *dramatis personae* (a useful list of whom is included as an appendix), all of which serves to identify the different functions performed by these exhibitions and the complex levels of meaning associated with them.

As a study of imperial exhibitions, *Fleeting Cities* emphasizes the way that the particular forms of spatial organization, and visualization associated with the genre functioned as a means of articulating and communicating messages about the technological, industrial, and cultural prowess of the European powers in order to justify their claims to imperial status and to sell the concept of imperialism to their citizens. All the exhibitions utilized the standard format of “living displays” of ethnic peoples in a “village” setting in order to give visual expression to the difference between modern, “civilized” societies and, backward, “uncivilized” peoples. At the same time these exhibitions were also increasingly able to draw on a well-established (quasi-canonical) and widely un-

derstood repertoire of architectural forms distinguished by “its own particular system of grammar, semantics and imagery” (p. 201). They were given a particularly dramatic form in the commercially driven and privately organized and financed 1908 Franco-British Exhibition, the brainchild of the Hungarian impresario Imre Kiralfy, one of the more colorful of the figures appearing in these pages, who was in the business of transforming cultural difference into a profitable spectacle for public entertainment. Innovations such as the use of the moving pavements (first used in Berlin), cinemas, big wheels, and the flip flaps which entertained the crowds, represented the application of modern technology to the creation of modern amusements, as did the use of reinforced concrete in the 1924 Wembley exhibition.

A parallel development was the emergence of a transnational public discourse about the meaning and function of exhibitions in society, of which the severest criticisms were to be found in Germany. Geppert argues that the decline of the imperial exhibition as a medium, hence the *fin-de-siècle* of the title, was foreshadowed as early as the 1880s in the issues raised by the prolonged discussions associated with proposals and plans for a world exhibition for Berlin, the outcome of which, however, thanks to the intervention of the Kaiser, was a local, if grandiose, trade fair rather than an international exhibition. As what came to be termed “exhibition fatigue” (*Austellungsmüdigkeit*) set in, and exhibitions grew larger and increasingly costly to stage, there was growing recognition in a number of quarters that the system was overblown and badly in need of reform. In the early twentieth century, as these events veered more and more in the direction of mass entertainment and their component parts became increasingly familiar, they began to appear increasingly at odds with the official rhetoric which accompanied them. Other tensions and problems also surfaced. By the 1890s, shifts in the relationship between the imperial powers and their dominions were already apparent as, for example, in the birth of the Indian National Congress in 1885. The advent of the twentieth century saw Germany defeated in a world war and stripped of her colonies, while those of her neighbors were becoming increasingly restless and Europe stood on the edge of an economic depression, all of which combined to effectively change the political and economic environment within which imperial exhibitions were conceived and received. So that, although in terms of numbers at least, the exhibitions at Wembley (1924) and Vincennes (1931) were deemed to be successful, they were staged in a very different political and

cultural climate from that of their predecessors.

From the perspective of urban historians, one of the more interesting features of Geppert's analysis is the relationship between the exhibitions and their host cities, which had to cater to the hundreds of thousands of visitors they attracted and for whom the great mass of ephemera associated with these events, such as postcards, was produced. While some of this still survives, little remains of the "fleeting cities" themselves, apart from the odd building, such as the Petit and Grand Palais in central Paris. Imre Kiralfy's shining White City was intended as a permanent structure, but rapidly became dilapidated although it was used as an exhibition center

until 1914 and the stadium survived for dog-racing until 1985. Nothing now remains of the stadium at Wembley, the iconic twin towers of which were finally demolished in 2003. At Vincennes all that remains is the Musée des Colonies, now reopened as a museum dealing with French immigration. This is an important and ambitious study which will serve as a valuable resource of reference for future students of the subject. It is extremely well illustrated and supported with plenty of useful graphs, appendices, and an extensive bibliography.

Note

[1]. Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," *New Formations* 4 (1988): 73-102.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Jill Steward. Review of Geppert, Alexander C. T., *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34167>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.