

The 2005 World Exposition, Aichi, Japan
Observations and Analysis
By Gordon Linden

Introduction

As of 9/12/05, Expo 2005 recorded 19,183,307 visits against a projected 15 million; the Expo will close on the 25th of September, 2005 having run for 185 days or about six months. With 120 international participants, 4 international organizations, and 9 major corporations, Expo 2005 is the first of the "Registered" category of international expositions to be sanctioned by the BIE. The international participants have been accommodated in standard industrial-type buildings which were erected by the organizers; the corporate participants have built very large and impressive structures. Following the conclusion of the Expo, both the industrial and corporate structures will be removed and the site converted to a park.

Background

Plans for Japan to host an Expo in 2005 surfaced during the period 1993 – 1995. At that time, the Japan "economic miracle" was in full flower and Japanese business interests were quite visible throughout the world. The province of Aichi, which is the home of Toyota and other Japanese industry, was indicated as the planned site. Located south of Tokyo about 1 1/2 hours by bullet train, north of Osaka, about an hour by bullet train, the location promised a large population base and well-established transportation infrastructure with which to support such an event.

Soon after Japan announced plans to pursue BIE sanction for 2005, Calgary, Canada also announced its intention to host an Expo in 2005. Canada, a consistent participant in Expos, had a good reputation for hosting Expos with both Montreal and, more recently, Vancouver '86 as evidence that Canada could put on a good show. Japan, on the other hand, had a reputation in the international community and the BIE for heavy-handed, industry-driven Expos, including many non-sanctioned events; even a modest flower show – Osaka '90 – was turned into a major Expo with large industrial pavilions overwhelming the smaller, more modest international participants' exhibits.

Unlike the process of bidding on an Olympic Games, the pursuit of BIE sanction is – generally – a gentleman-like affair conducted in a fairly unemotional environment. For 2005, this changed dramatically as Japan conducted an all-out campaign to be sanctioned. At the end of the day, Aichi was selected but not until Japan had reportedly spent over \$25 million on the bid process which swamped Calgary's \$7 million bid budget; Japan went so far as to provide gold Rolex watches to some of the key members of the BIE with the "Aichi 2005" logo. Calgary's defeat did not go down well in Canada and there were calls for Canada to withdraw from the BIE.

As the smoke was clearing from Monte Carlo, where Aichi was picked for Expo 2005, Japan's economic troubles were beginning to surface. A variety of corruption scandals combined with the uncovering of shady banking practices and dubious investments overseas served to burst the "bubble" and usher in an extended period of economic gloom in Japan which, among informed financial pundits, persists to this day. During some of the gloomiest years, doubts arose as to whether or not Japan would back away altogether from the project. But, in the end, as with previous Expos, the corporations came through – with government urging – and Expo 2005 was opened.

Season/Attendance Projection

Expo 2005 opened on March 25 and will run through September 25 for a total of 185 days (6 months). The initial projection of attendance was 15 million, although by mid-July (at the half-way point), the number of visits had reached 9 million. This pace has been maintained until almost the end of the season and thus the total could reach 20 million.

Theme

Given that Japan has many large, densely populated urban areas, there is an inherent appeal in an Expo theme that celebrates "Nature's Wisdom". In practice, a site which features the presence of "green buildings" and structures, large park-like areas with water features, and exhibits focused on the environment provides a very welcome setting for such an event. Although there is considerable worldwide controversy about the environment and issues such as global warming which could have been either a turn-off to corporations or a soap box for the more rhetoric-driven participants, the theme was reasonably well-handled and meaningful; some practical information and displays are provided to visitors.

Site Layout

Unlike most Expos and large scale visitor attraction sites which are basically flat, the Aichi site, being located in a somewhat hilly, forested area, was developed in a very unique way, maintaining the natural topography and "inserting" the pavilions and activity areas within the overall park-like setting. A very innovative solution was devised to focus most of the pedestrian circulation around the site along a centralized ring which provided linkages to the various exhibit clusters or "Global Commons". Rather than grading the site severely, the pedestrian ring has been elevated on stilts with major walkways connecting at various levels. Although many elevators and escalators were provided at various points along the ring, there were also many, many stairways although visitors did not show any annoyance at having to walk up and down long flights of stairs.

Transportation

There are several ways of getting to the Expo site from the nearby City of Nagoya, the only one of which that involves the automobile, being taxis. That is to say, only mass transit is available to get to the site which includes train, a new Maglev train, buses and taxis; there are no large parking lots for autos.

Onsite, there are several forms of transportation available for visitors however these are mostly low-capacity systems which are basically "rides" and are not designed to carry major volumes of people. There are two aerial trams, one of which is free and connects the main site with a remote site; the other tram, which has a modest fare, connects the Corporate Pavilion area with the south end of the site. Other transport systems include a small "elephant train" which follows the elevated pedestrian ring as well as fuel cell buses which follow a fixed route linking various sectors of the site.

Pavilions

As with many of the previous Expo-like events held in Japan since Osaka's 1970 Expo, the presence and indeed, the dominance of "Japan, Inc." is not surprising. Located adjacent to the North Gate, which is the main public entrance to the Expo, is the large Corporate Pavilion Area. Giving this prominent site to the corporations rather than the international participants was reportedly a source of annoyance to the BIE, but since this pattern has been prevalent at previous Japanese Expos, it was no surprise to see it again in Aichi. Major pavilions including Toyota, Hitachi and Japan Rail, have invested heavily in theme park-quality shows and rides the likes of which are not found in the pavilions operated by the international participants. While some of the pavilions adhere to the Expo theme, such as Hitachi's which features a ride that heightens visitors' awareness about endangered species in a fun and entertaining way, others have blatantly disregarded it. Japan Rails' pavilion features a 3D movie about Maglev trains while Mitsui-Toshiba's pavilion features a futuristic animated movie into which the scanned faces of visitors are placed in the roles of key characters – an amazing technological feat which, no doubt, has many commercial entertainment applications; Toyota's pavilion has a robot orchestra and a "Cirque du Soleil"-like acrobatic show. As has been a common problem at other Expos, the hourly capacity of these large, attractive pavilions is limited and therefore many casual visitors do not get a chance to experience them. However, one innovation – used at museums and theme parks for several years now, but never at an Expo – has been introduced at Aichi which partially addresses this problem: the timed ticket. Visitors with access to the Internet or via cell phone can reserve a timed ticket for up to two pavilions prior to visiting the Expo. In spite of this convenience, many visitors experience long lines with wait times of 90 minutes or more. Although this innovation has not solved the problem, at least many

visitors did not experience anything wait as long as the 8 hour wait time experienced at Lisbon for the futuristic 3D movie pavilion.

The international participants have been provided space in basic, unadorned industrial buildings. These buildings, which are to be removed after the Expo, provide a good standard of space and are relatively easy to adapt for exhibition purposes. Although the temporary use of convention and tradefair halls (Lisbon and Hanover) is also a cost-effective solution, the flexibility of siting and arranging the temporary industrial buildings around common circulation areas – called Global Commons – provides a highly functional and attractive solution.

The number of international participants - 120 - is less than at Seville, Lisbon and Hanover (155). On the one hand, one might assume that Japan would have been willing to spend the money to subsidize the additional 35 to reach the 155 mark, but perhaps a combination of political and/or economic problems and a recognition on the part of the organizers that a participant needs more than a slide projector and a sheet to make a decent showing at an Expo conspired to make the cutoff point where it ended up (at 120).

There are also national (Japan), regional (Aichi Province) and local (cities) pavilions. Japan and Aichi have built and operate two pavilions each, one apiece on the main site and one apiece on the remote - Seto - site. Visiting the remote site, it is apparent that there was a need to offer some significant attraction content to this area to attract visitors. The Japanese pavilion has a live show with over 30 performers who perform a theater piece 20 times a day.

Merchandise/Food Services

Most of the international participants, as permitted by BIE rules, have small shops selling various "national" items from their countries of origin. Some also have food services ranging from snacks to restaurants. The Expo offers a fairly small amount of merchandise in only a few shops and via mobile carts.

Expo at Night

The recent European Expos (Hanover, Lisbon, Seville) have all had very large crowds in the evenings. Each offered a nighttime "extravaganza" involving laser/light shows on a lake. Aichi has followed this tradition, although the show begins much earlier (8:00PM) and does not appear to be as wildly popular as those aforementioned shows which kept visitors on-site late into the evening. Attendance at the International Pavilions dropped off dramatically after about 5:00PM in the evening and visitors began departing from the site, presumably, for the train trip home.

Legacy

As with Expo '70 in Osaka, the intention of the Aichi Expo organizers is to remove most of the pavilions and structures and make the area a park.