

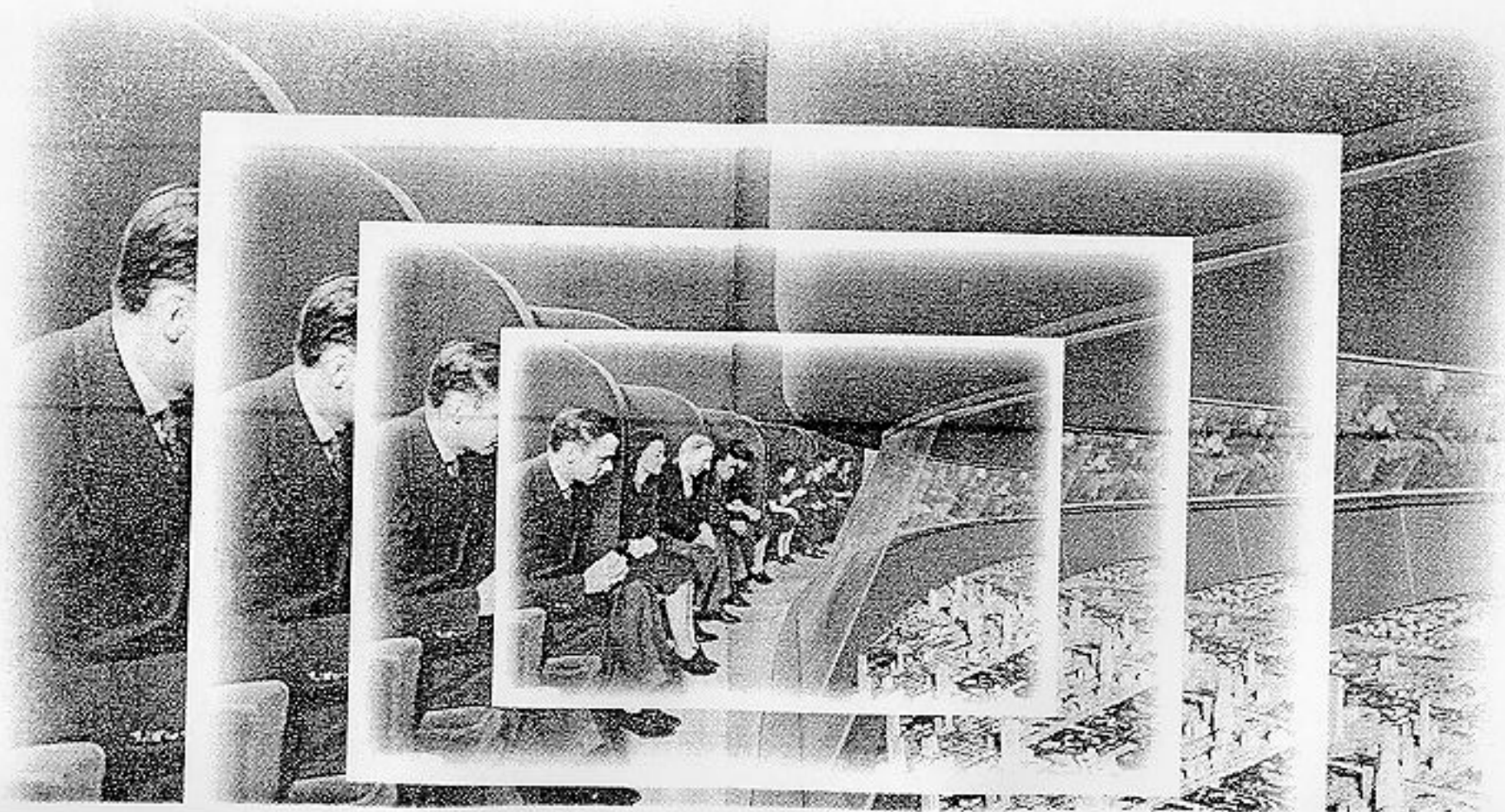
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CITY LORE

The Day Tomorrow Died

Sixty Years Ago a World's Fair Ended, and With It Dreams for a Better Future



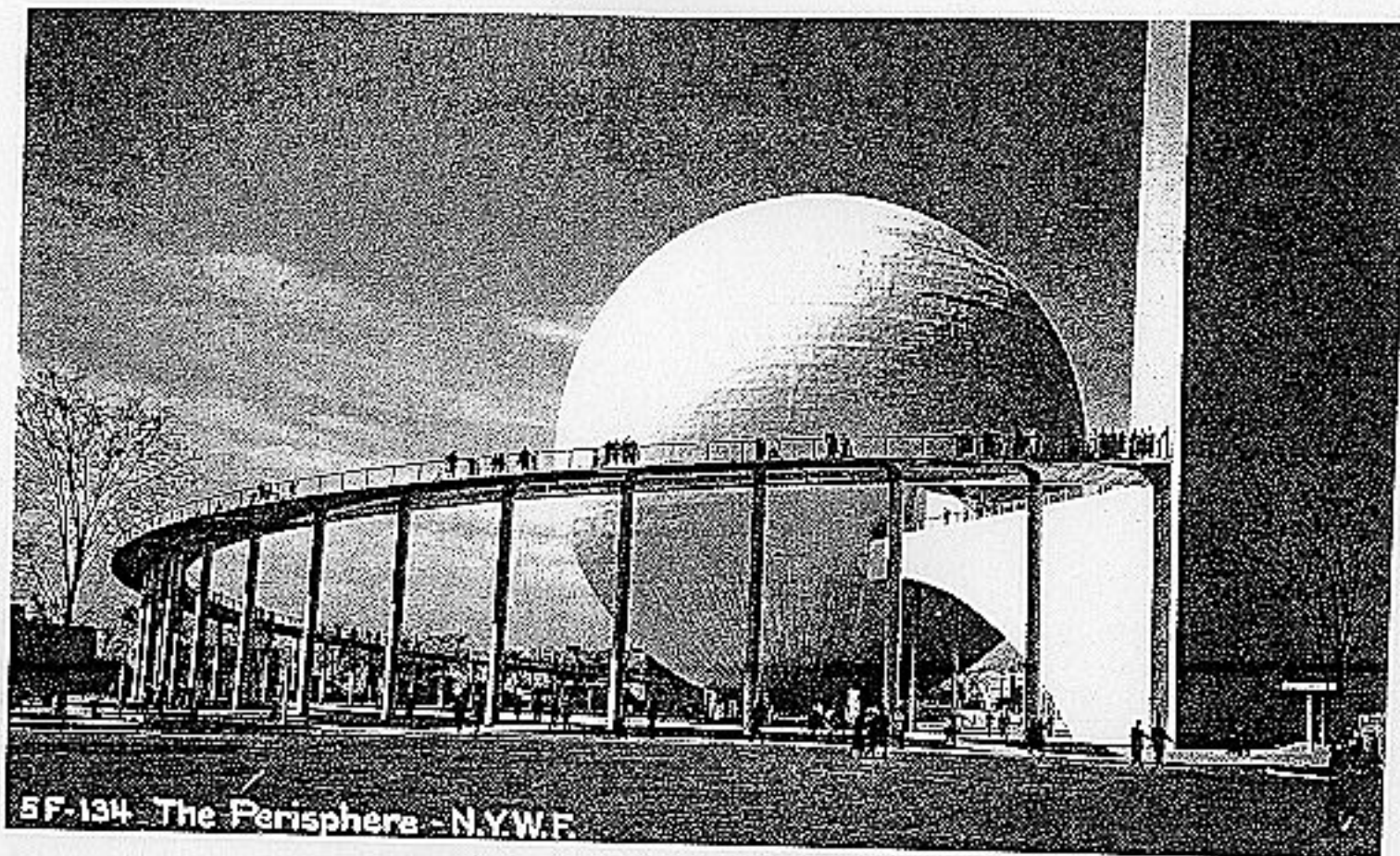
THE Future died 60 years ago this Friday.

On Oct. 27, 1940, the great New York World's Fair of 1939-40 ended in Flushing Meadows, Queens. As crowds congregated under unsettled skies, a bugler sounded taps soon after midnight and the fair, a kaleidoscopic extravaganza that in theme and scheme had promised "Building the World of Tomorrow With the Tools of Today," was pronounced closed. And thus did an ebullient expression of in a hopeful ever-after come to a halt; its songs silenced, its motors stilled, its astonishing attractions interred as history. In the end, the fair's "Dawn of a New Day" proved no match for the dark exigencies of the grim real one.

What essentially remains of that exposition's 300 or so buildings on the original site includes a ramshackle boathouse on Meadow Lake (called Fountain Lake at the '39 fair, rechristened Liberty Lake a year later) and the New York City Building, also part of the 1964-65 fair and currently home to the Queens Museum of Art. The Life Savers Parachute Tower or Parachute Jump was long ago dismantled and carted off to Coney Island, a lonely specter on Brooklyn's distant shore. Aside from these solitary relics, the 1939-40 New York World's Fair most ardently endures as appreciating memorabilia on such Internet sites as eBay. And like latter-day splinters allegedly filched from the True Cross, the allure of these modern artifacts resides in the awe of the buyer. Here key chains and place mats transmit the prospect of deliverance through spiffy product design and kooky graphic layout.

But looking back today on that lost international exposition, it's sobering to realize that the fair advanced the healing, transcendent power of technology while fascism was gearing up for ever more unholy systems of maiming and killing. While attractions that included General Motors' era-eradicating Futurama ("the city of 1960, with its abundant sunshine and fresh air") and the Museum of Natural History's galaxy-busting Time and Space Auditorium ("the sightseer can outdo Buck Rogers; soar into celestial vastness at 480,000,000,000,000,000,000 miles an hour

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5F-134 The Perisphere - N.Y.W.F.

through meteoric showers") preached social planning and science, Nazism was savaging democracy and moving toward the Final Solution's systematic murder of millions. In fact, a month before the fair's demise, the playwright Robert E. Sherwood, an opponent of isolationism, voiced fear that if England fell to Germany it would incite "an orgy of hysterical appeasement" plunging the planet into a terminal dark age.

The fair's apostles were confident, however, that a better tomorrow called to us all, damn the facts and the aspects. President Franklin D. Roosevelt echoed the fair's enthusiasm in a speech carried by the new medium of television on the expo's starting day, April 30, 1939. In this address, the first time a chief executive was ever seen on television, F.D.R. declared the fair officially open: "Our wagon is hitched to a star. But it is a star of friendship, a star of progress for

mankind, a star of greater happiness and less hardship, a star of international good will, and, above all, a star of peace."

BY fair's finish we would surely be as ready for that New Day as we were for the New Deal. And as was true of Dorothy and friends in "The Wizard of Oz" — a movie released the year the fair made its debut, focusing on another phantasmagoric Eden somewhere over a Technicolor rainbow — we, too, would be transfigured by our journey from the common to the chimerical. Well, it was pretty to think so.

Then again, the 1939-40 New York World's Fair's sunny simulation of a terrific tomorrow did entertain and sustain some 50 million, who, as the columnist Meyer Berger wrote in *The New York Times*, would look back on that beguiling vision and recall the

Now six decades since the fair and its mythic white icons of Trylon and Perisphere — co-joined buildings of an elegant 700-foot-pyramid and a majestic 200-foot-high globe — were demolished, our sense of Tomorrow has radically changed. "The Future" is still out there but it is one mean dystopia. Global warming, collision with a killer comet, biotech scourges, nuclear annihilation... These doomsday epitaphs are our postmodern postmortem on tomorrow. Since the 1939-40 New York World's Fair's demise our view of futurity has gone from all's well to Orwell, a once-radiant tomorrow degrading into a radioactive grave.

YET perhaps the real future was already menacing the fair's roseate version even before the expo's end. On July 4, 1940, as two New York City policemen bent low over a suitcase removed from the British Pavilion, probing with pliers a wired bomb, a roaring flash shattered the makeshift Elysium. Both policemen were blown away and raining rubble seriously injured many more. The crime was never solved. Terrorism convulsed the World of Tomorrow, its aftershocks rumbling still.

Despite the fair's misplaced faith in the shape of things to come, its naive assurance in technology as redeemer, its beckons with seductive innocence. Its comforting curves and uplifting contours offer a reassuring rendition of what might have been, a retro-revisitation of a happily-ever-before when tomorrow had a future.

Shortly before the sun set on the Dawn of a New Day in Queens, an editorial writer for a now-vanished New York paper composed the fair's obituary: "It will be like the end of a world — a world of dazzling exhibits and displays, of charm, glamour and gaiety." And those left in the fair's wake would be "confronted solely with the actual world of tomorrow, which from all indications will be a harsh and comfortless contrast to Grover Whalen's paradise."

Paradise, not exactly, but surely an oasis in the punishing days of world calamity; a heroic attempt to throw light into dark corners, to send a reverberant shout to the very rafters of the century, to let soar a jubilant cheer for tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and, just maybe, the day after that.

World of Tomorrow reflected on the "onyx surface" of the Flushing River "in full color, and upside down." Here you could watch 10 million volts of artificial lightning jolt across a stage; witness a seven-foot robot chatting with a man; ogle mermaids performing underwater back flips at Salvador Dalí's surreal attraction *Dream of Venus* (Or Lyving Pictures); or maybe even win a free long distance phone call to any listed telephone in the United States. Built for \$155,000,000, situated on 1,216 acres and staffed by some 50,000 workers, the fair featured at its height 60 nations and most of the American states.

And presiding over this vast enchantment during its formative first year was a fastidious, mustachioed man named Grover Whalen. Though Whalen officially served as the fair's president, he more nearly operated as its evangelizing pitchman.