



which experts from Kenya, Indonesia, Japan, and many other places gave papers on transportation and communication.

But if experience is any guide, these elaborate preparations will blend with the creative results of a number of national, provincial, or state capitals, and the ideas produced subsequently by hundreds of architects, designers, and filmmakers.

It is this combination of creative forces coming together to produce something unexpected that makes a fair like Expo 86 so exciting and so engrossing.

World fair fever

What had happened in Vancouver is world fair fever. One American historian of fairs has compared them to potlatch, at which west coast Indians competed to give away increasingly expensive objects; in the context of British Columbia, the image seems unusually apt.

At a fair, national governments (and provinces, states and corporations) compete to prove their stature by displaying their wealth and ingenuity; the host government naturally makes the most lavish show of all. Like a potlatch, a fair is an elaborate form of boasting.

Of course, Expo 86 will attract visitors — many thousands of them — which will do wonders for Vancouver — ‘a city preparing to take its place on the world stage,’ — according to the advertising for Expo 86. So the province will get its investment back, many times over.

As for the visitors, what can they expect to see at Expo? A great many exhibits dealing with high-speed trains, hydrofoils, telephone switching systems and satellites. An array of tall ships. An enormous amount of entertainment, including a World Festival that will bring such organisations as the Royal Shakespeare Company to Vancouver for the first time. Many fun-park amusement rides. A good many historical surveys of transportation in this or that province or country. And, of course, a great deal of imaginative architecture: Eberhard Zeidler, who

designed Ontario Place and the Eaton Centre in Toronto, is designing the pavilions for both Canada and Ontario.

But most of the content remains, at this point, a mystery. China, for instance, has so far divulged nothing about what it will show in the space set aside for it. The host country, or province, can only make space available and then hope for the best. The advertising for Expo 86 (‘World in Motion, World in Touch’) is purposely vague, like the advertising for Expo 67 in 1965.

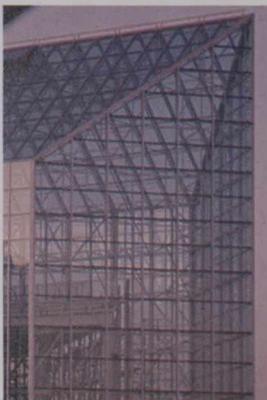
The traditional subject of a world exposition is the future, and the traditional mood is hopeful. At New York in 1939 as at London in 1851, the exhibits showed the new industrial developments that would presumably make life more stimulating and pleasant; just beneath the surface of every exposition, or sometimes on the surface itself, there’s always a glimpse of the Utopia that the world’s planners have in store for us.

But these days, that is getting harder to do. Few people believe in Utopia, and not everyone believes in the future. One of the people who have followed the symposia and planning meetings around Expo 86 was recently asked to predict the mood of the fair. He said that as far as he could see: ‘The overall mood is likely to reflect a searching for some sort of meaning about what the world is coming to. It’s likely to express an uncertainty. I think that what people are going to come away knowing about is the extreme difficulty of predicting the future.’

In a sense, a world exposition in the 1980s is a kind of philosophical contradiction, and perhaps that’s what makes it so appealing. In a time when most of the old Utopian idealism is discredited, when most governments are frightened about the future, Vancouver and BC are proposing to entertain themselves and the world with an examination of some of the most stimulating ideas available.

In a time of pessimism, just holding a world exposition is in itself extravagantly and defiantly optimistic.

Expo fair follows long line of tradition



British Columbia's glass pavilion.

If the international exposition has a father he’s Prince Albert, Queen Victoria’s husband, who sponsored the first great fair in 1851 in London. That exposition set the pattern. Sir Joseph Paxton’s 18-acre-iron-and-glass Crystal Palace, which housed the fair, anticipated crucial elements of modern architecture — and ever since, architects have been using international expositions as testing grounds for their ideas.

The contents of the Palace were also typical of fairs to come. Forty nations showed the latest products of the industrial revolution, such as the mechanical grain thresher. Since then industrialists and engineers have competed to show their latest products at world fairs.

Prince Albert’s exposition summed up the industrial revolution and set the standard by which ambitious exposition planners judge themselves. All

of them, in one way or another, have tried to make a mark on history.

When they have succeeded — as at Expo 67 or the New York fair of 1939 — it has been through what seems at the time like a magical accident. Occasionally, the fair builders rise above the mundane promotion of industrial products and political ideologies; the spirit of the time, always difficult to define, somehow enters their best exhibits and transforms them into emblems of the moment.

When that happens, a world exposition becomes for the audience a source of inspiration as well as a pleasant outing. Then, long after, people write books about it, like Burton Benedict’s recent *The Anthropology of World’s Fairs*, about the Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915 in San Francisco; or make movies about it, like Vincente Minnelli’s *Meet*