

86: How fair is the world's fair?

Story: Suzette C. Chan
Photos: Timothy Hellum, Kabir Khan

creation projects.

Meanwhile, those who would later be known as "Bad British Columbians" started wondering how the government could reconcile spending so much money on a risky business venture when the Socreds were axing social services and civil servants.

A study prepared for the B.C. government projected that Expo 86 would inject \$3 billion into the province's economy, \$900 million of business in the rest of Canada, not including some \$570 million in tax revenue for the federal government, and would create over 9,000 construction jobs while employing 83,000 workers during the fair.

But a group of University of British Columbia economics professors didn't see things that way. At the CUP conference, economist Chuck Blakeney questioned the effectiveness of Expo 86 as the economic panacea Bill Bennett would have voters believe it will be.

"It started in 1979 at no cost and now they [Expo organizers] are admitting to a [projected] deficit of \$400 million. They were expecting 28 million visitors, now it's down to 13.5 million. The question is: is this an efficient way to create jobs?"

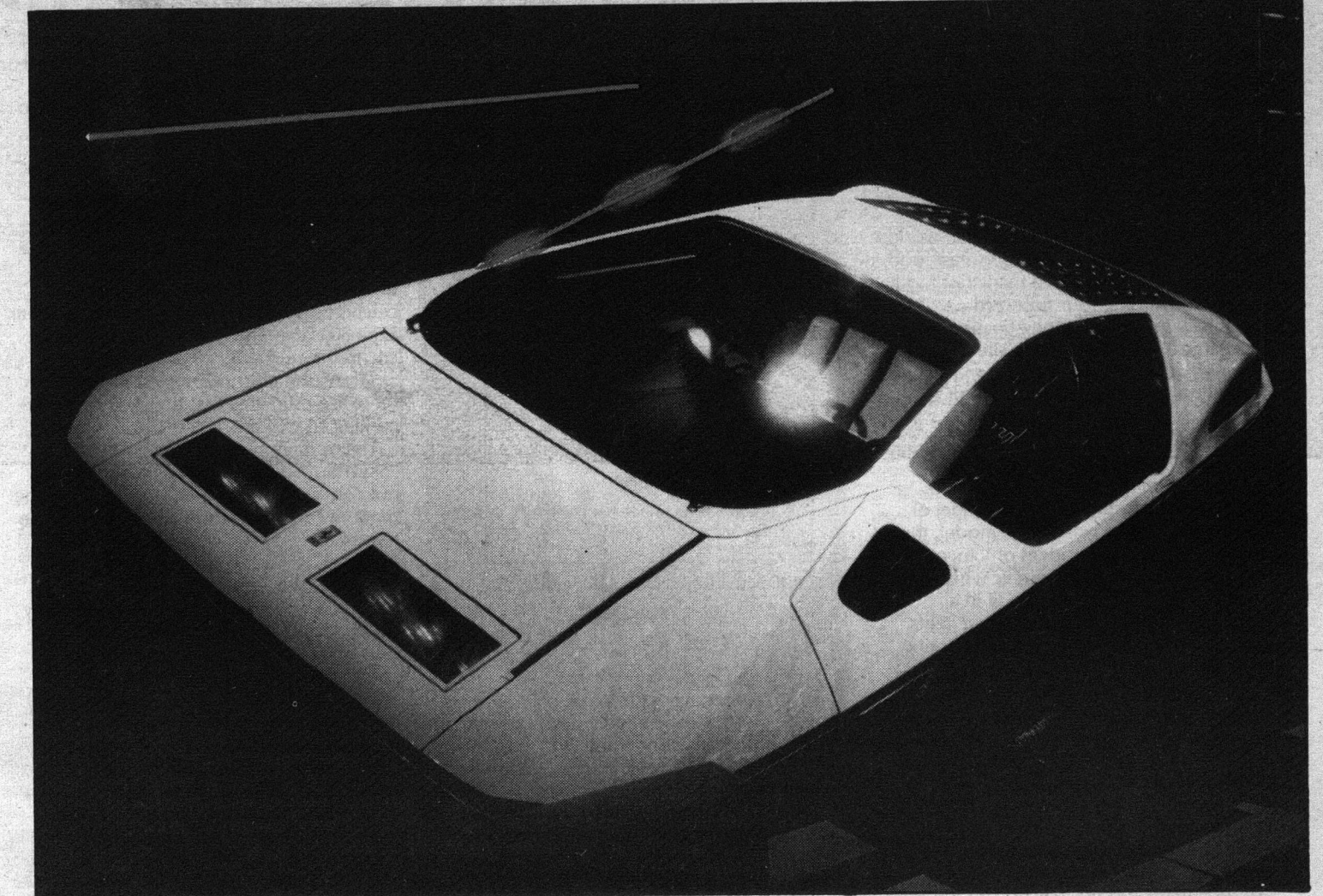
The UBC report anticipates that Expo will end up costing the province \$560 million more than it will bring in. The economists say that the injection into the economy will only be \$536 million, far short of the \$2.8 billion the Expo study projects. As well, the UBC report estimates that the \$800 million tag on the fair is at least \$300 million too low.

Economist Blakeney also attacked the government's expectation that Expo will attract more tourists into the province.

"During the Los Angeles Olympics, business at Disneyland, Martha's Vineyard and other Southern California attractions was down by 30 to 40 per cent." Blakeney reasons that families on limited budgets will be forced to make a choice about where to vacation in B.C. rather than spend money at a number of tourist centres. "Money spent on the interior will be shifted to Vancouver. It's merely a transfer of expenditure. The distributional costs in terms of jobs and tourist revenue will be enormous."

Blakeney also pointed to past Expos' dubious record as both revenue generator and lasting publicity vehicle. Calling such expectations "a myth", Blakeney rolled out statistics that showed that a city would be lucky to be successful either monetarily or morally.

The Knoxville fair in 1982 made \$7 million but the city itself is still as unknown as it was before the fair. Montreal is remembered as being the beginning of a



The "vehicles of the future" exhibit is as inspired as the car cavalcade in West Edmonton Mall.

Photo: Timothy Hellum

bold new patriotic era in Canada but final figures on the fair came in \$900 million in the red. The city of New Orleans, it turned out, didn't need the publicity or the ensuing \$150 million deficit. Possibly the biggest loss was suffered by organizers of the 1985 World's Fair in Japan. After that Expo did not attract the number of crowds expected (most visitors were Japanese citizens), seven Expo officials were reported to have been so distraught at losing face that they committed suicide.

Blakeney and his UBC colleagues believe the money the province is willing to risk on Expo could be better spent on upgrading social services and on reforestation or salmon enhancement, projects they believe will have more effective long-term benefits.

"The Western World," Blakeney concludes of world expositions, "would be better without them."

Since world expositions are billed as windows to the future, Larry Keane, editor of *New Directions*, magazine wondered what kind of future Bill Bennett's Expo 86 projects — and concluded that it will be an oppressive and overly commercial one.

The most obvious clues to the philosophy of Bennett and Jim Pattison, Expo 86's organizational kingpin, and the rest of the organizing committee are in the architecture.

The indisputed god of Canadian architecture, Arthur Erickson, pronounced the Expo site "pedestrian" and said he was "glad" that he had "nothing to do with it." The internationally-acclaimed architect, whose buildings serve as landmarks all over the lower mainland, and who won an international medal last year for his design of the new Canadian embassy in Washington, was to non-B.C. residents surprisingly passed over as chief project architect. Erickson, it turns out,

publicly endorsed the NDP in the 1975 provincial election.

Another prominent Canadian architect was quoted in the *Globe and Mail* as saying "I don't think Expo should look like Sarnia-by-the-Sea."

The lack of inspiration in the architecture is probably due to well-publicized stormy divisions between the Expo committee and the original Expo architect, Bruno Fresci. Fresci quit the project last year, leaving the site in a blueprint mess. He now has nothing good to say about the Expo site or the fair organizers.

When quizzed on why Fresci left, a protocol officer who led a number of CUP delegates on a tour of the site, said Fresci was but one of a rash of Expo casualties. "We've had 21 major management changes," the guide said. "Fresci was just a designer."

Rather than inspiring national pride or at

Expo' continued on page 10.

Is Expo 86 an economic panacea or just a giant PR gimmick?

Photo: Timothy Hellum

