

# Resisting Urban Spectacle: The 1984 Louisiana World Exposition and the Contradictions of Mega Events

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## Abstract

This paper examines the planning and staging of the 1984 Louisiana Exposition, the last world's fair in the United States, and makes comparisons with other US world's fairs, to provide insight into the sources of opposition and resistance to urban spectacles. Drawing on the work of Guy Debord and his concept of the 'society of the spectacle', this paper advances a conception of mega events as spectacles of contestation that embody contradictory tendencies and articulate conflictual and opposing meanings of urban space and reality. Rather than obscuring and camouflaging urban problems, mega events like world's fairs express social inequalities and display highly contradictory urban representations that can spawn resistant agendas, complicate elite redevelopment agendas and divide pro-growth coalitions. Through a critical interrogation of the Debordian concept of spectacle, the analysis in this paper suggests a new theory of mega events as sites of struggle and articulators of political dissent, a conception that helps to explain the increasing international opposition and protest against the Olympics and the mega-event strategy.

## Introduction

Over the past decade or so, urban theorists and scholars have debated the growing significance of mega events in the economic revitalisation strategies of cities around the world. Mega events or 'hallmark' or 'landmark' events are large spectacles that have

a "dramatic character, mass popular appeal, and international significance" (Roche, 2000, p. 1). Unlike local festivals or small tourist attractions, mega events like the Olympics, the World Cup and world's fairs are associated with costly investments in infrastructure

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development, extensive and intensive formal planning, and the use of sophisticated revitalisation strategies for urban re-imaging (Hiller, 2000; Andranovich *et al.*, 2001). The diverse work of Burbank *et al.* (2001), Horne and Manzenreiter (2006), Eisinger (2000), Richards and Williams (2004) and Shoval (2002) shows that nations and cities have enthusiastically embraced the mega-event strategy as a major promotional tool to disseminate a favourable image, bolster profit-making and transform urban space. The pursuit of growth and inward investment combined with the desire to undercut other cities in the competitive race to accumulate capital drives the bidding process and staging of major spectacles in which the Olympics, World Cup, Super Bowl and other mega events have become integral components of what French theorist Guy Debord (1967/1994) called the 'society of the spectacle'. Waitt (1999), Smith and Fox (2007) and Gold and Gold (2005, 2007) note that spectacles like the Olympics now combine with corporate sponsorship, exclusive broadcast rights and international media attention to provide an important new medium through which urban boosters can showcase a city. Overall, the growth and development of mega events illuminate key features of contemporary urban society and constitute a burgeoning field of urban research and socio-historical study.

Over the decades, much urban research has examined the 'economic impact' of mega events, the legacy or effects of mega events on urban built form and the power and influence of growth coalitions in organising and planning mega events (Smith and Fox, 2007; Gospodini, 2009; Jansson, 2005). As major cultural events that have dramatic character and international significance, world's fairs have long served to mobilise political and economic élites to leverage cultural and material resources to showcase a city to the world and attract new sources of capital investment (Ley and Olds, 1988). The

desire to be competitive with other cities and attract inward investment is often integral to gaining public support of bids to host mega events. Mega events often act as catalysts for urban transformation by appealing to people to work together towards a common goal. Political and economic élites attempt to unify disparate groups and interests, mitigate or co-opt the opposition and otherwise weaken and neutralise resistance by arguing that the hosting of a mega event will contribute to business vitality and economic development. The mega-event planning process often functions to depoliticise spectacle using a rhetoric of 'growth', 'progress' and 'development' that conceals the parochial interests of powerful groups and interests. Insofar as possible, sponsors attempt to present the mega event as beneficial for all social groups and the city in general, to discourage public scrutiny of the costs and to make difficult genuine debate on the real aims, including the benefits, liabilities and consequences (Horne, 2007; for an overview, see Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006).

Recent years have seen the emergence of a diminutive yet critical literature that has begun to consider seriously the ways in which the mega-event planning process and event preparations provoke community protest, political opposition and challenge. Scholars have noted several sources of resistance to mega events, including the considerable secrecy, lack of accountability and transparency and undemocratic nature of organisations that run mega events; the propensity of growth coalitions to underestimate the costs, misjudge the negative environmental impacts and overstate the potential economic and social benefits of mega events; and the recognition that developers and sponsors typically engage in self-serving rhetoric and deceit to mislead governments and the public sector in order to get projects approved (Hall, 2006; Flyvbjerg *et al.* 2003; Lowes, 2002). One focus of this promising scholarship concerns which groups benefit and suffer, who is excluded

and what are the limits and possibilities for contestation and resistance. Another focus of research concerns how different groups of people in the host city receive and interpret the images, symbols and stereotypes of the city contained in event publicity, advertising and promotions. To quote Horne and Manrenzeiter, the hosting of mega events

provides multiple meanings for different groups of agents—as they happen, when they have taken place, and perhaps, especially as they are being bid for. Advocates of hosting mega events will deploy a range of discursive strategies to win over public opinion internally (Horne and Manrenzeiter, 2006, p. 13).

Important, mega events intimate cities as sites of struggle and contestation because the dramatisation and showcasing of space and culture incite intense debate and conflict over whose urban reality is being represented and narrated, by whom and for what purpose.

In this paper, I draw on the work of Guy Debord and his concept of the ‘society of the spectacle’ to examine the conflicts and contradictory effects of the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition in New Orleans. Empirically, I illustrate how the 1984 exposition became a major flashpoint and battleground in which various political alliances struggled to influence the form and trajectory of urban economic restructuring during a period in which the federal government was defunding cities and pressuring them to adopt an entrepreneurial position to pursue urban revitalisation and tourism development. Theoretically, I identify the ways in which mega events unfold contradictions and irrationalities, give rise to conflicting meanings and effects, and constitute fields of domination and resistance. For years, scholars have assailed mega events and other tourist attractions as instruments of elite hegemony designed to mollify popular opinion, win public support and provide legitimacy for imperialist policies, and to neutralise opposition to pro-growth agendas

(for overviews, see Rydell, 1984; Broudehoux, 2007). Other more celebratory accounts and economic impact studies have viewed mega events as bringing a wealth of new investment and cultural attractions that benefit community institutions and promote economic growth (Linden and Creighton, 2008; Kotler *et al.*, 1993). Thus, as the argument goes, expositions and other spectacles like the Olympics can benefit cities economically by increasing the extra-local exposure, enhancing the prestige of local products and cultural institutions, and stimulating economic growth.

Rather than embracing either/or explanations of mega events, I develop a both/and conceptualisation that views mega events as spectacles of contestation in which opposing groups and interests battle to control the production, representation and consumption of spectacular imagery and symbols. In this multifaceted conceptualisation, mega events contain both oppressive and negative attributes as well as resistant and transformative qualities that reflect the politics of representation and urban meaning-making. Mega events and other tourism spectacles do not mask urban problems and inequalities, but express unequal social relations and antagonisms in society at large to the extent that they put on display and articulate the contradictions of race, class, gender and other structures of domination and subordination. Such a conception avoids celebratory, one-sided and reductive views and probes for the conflictual, contested and contradictory nature of mega events.

## US World’s Fairs and the Society of the Spectacle

Since their inception during the mid 19th century, world’s fairs have excited much debate and discussion over their multitude of roles and cultural meanings, impact on architecture and urban form, and trajectory of historical development (for an

overview, see Gold and Gold, 2005). Early, Walter Benjamin (1978, p. 49) claimed that 19th-century world's fairs "are sites of pilgrimages to the commodity fetish" that express the emerging values of profligacy and excessiveness in the growth of a broad-based consuming public organised around the fetishism of commodities. For Leo Tolstoy, the 1893 Chicago World's Columbia Exposition was a

striking example of imprudence and hypocrisy; everything is done for profit and amusement—from boredom—but noble aims of the people are ascribed to it. Orgies are better (L. Tolstoy; quoted in Rydell, 1993, p. 15).

In his observations on the Berlin Trade Exhibition of 1896, Georg Simmel viewed expositions as a 'fundamental type of human sociation' involving the consumption of commodities. For Simmel, the significance of international expositions is that

in the face of the richness and diversity of what is offered, the only unifying and colorful factor is that of amusement (Simmel, 1896/2000, p. 257.)

A city that hosts an exposition enters into the 'totality of cultural production' because merchandise from around the world has "attained a conclusive form and become part of a single whole" in the rationalised space of the exposition grounds (Simmel, 1896/2000, p. 256).

In a series of articles and books, Robert Rydell argues that 20th-century world's fairs in the US promoted Darwinian theories of racial domination and White supremacy, sought to uphold national progress towards a future utopia and to encourage people to place their faith in the ability of science and engineering to design the world of tomorrow (Rydell, 1984, 1989, 1993; Rydell *et al.*, 2000). For Rydell and other scholars, world's fairs anticipate the development of shopping malls, Disney theme parks, sports mega events and

the 'cathedrals of consumption' described by sociologists Maurice Roche (2000) and George Ritzer (2005). As short-term events that have long-term consequences, world's fairs express a variety of implicit and explicit assumptions and ideas about relations between nations, the nature of technology and urban development, and the place of art and culture in society (Benedict, 1983).

Many scholars acknowledge that mega events have become major strategies of urban revitalisation, but they disagree over the costs and benefits of mega events, the historical trajectory of mega event development and the residual effects of mega events. The concept of the 'society of the spectacle' developed by French theorist Guy Debord is a powerful heuristic device for illuminating the conflictual and contradictory effects of world's fairs and other urban mega events. In the *Society of the Spectacle* and other essays, Debord (1957/1981, 1967/1994) employed the concept of the 'spectacle' to refer to a new stage in the development of capitalism, a shift from a commodity-producing society to an image-producing society dominated by advertising, entertainment, television and mass media, and other culture industries. In the spectacle, "life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles" (1967/1994, p. 1), social relations become mediated by images and separation and estrangement become the dominant conditions of existence. The spectacle belies a society of creative and reflexive individuals and constitutes individuals as automatons who are forced to gaze passively on images and representations created by others (Debord, 1967/1994, p. 157). In Debord's words

When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings—dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior ... But the spectacle is not merely a matter of images, nor even of images plus sounds. It is whatever escapes people's activity, whatever eludes

their practical reconsideration and correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever *representation* becomes independent, the spectacle regenerates itself (Debord, 1967/1994, p. 18).

The spectacle corresponds to the omnipresence of the commodity where social life becomes “blanketed by substratum after substratum of commodities” (Debord, 1967/1994, p. 42) to the extent that images and appearances come to constitute reality. The problem, according to Debord, is “not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see”, but that “commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity” (p. 42; original emphasis). The totalisation of commodification represents the abstraction and mystification of reality, where people become spectators of their own lives, assigned to roles that subject them to a condition of quiescence, atomisation, stupefaction and conformity.

The work of Debord has received a considerable attention in the past decade or so, but critics have attacked his work for its vacuous and ambiguous quality, his monolithic conception of the spectacle and overall lack of theoretical and empirical specificity (for an overview, see Gotham and Krier, 2008). Thus, whereas Debord presents few examples of the spectacle’s influence in everyday life, I examine the planning and development of the 1984 Louisiana Exposition and make comparisons with other world’s fairs to illuminate the paradoxes and conflicts that mega events evoke. Hence, rather than viewing mega events and other spectacles as instruments of hegemonic power, I advance a conception of mega events as destabilising events that display inequalities and social problems, provoke intense conflict and engender collective struggles over the allocation of material and cultural resources. In this conception, it is useful to view mega events as contested cultural terrains that express a variety of disparate

representations and effects. Rather than starting with an assumption that mega events reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies, we can view mega events as discursive fields of contestation and struggle where a variety of contending groups and organisations battle to legitimate their conceptions of a city as valid and authoritative and delegitimate rival interpretations and meanings. An analysis of mega events can provide insights into the dynamics of urban growth coalitions and politics, the deleterious consequences and irrationalities of the mega-event strategy and the basis of collective opposition to event preparations and development. Examining the planning and staging of the 1984 Louisiana Exposition can help to illuminate the complex and highly contradictory ways in which mega events express power relations and can generate antagonistic mobilisations to challenge the urban *status quo*.

### Staging a ‘Once in a Lifetime Experience’

The 1984 Louisiana Exposition had its origins in the 1960s and 1970s as high unemployment, deindustrialisation and population out-migration and deconcentration wrought havoc in the Louisiana and New Orleans economy. Jobs in the manufacturing and the chemical and petroleum sectors plummeted in the decades after World War II. From 1967 to 1977, manufacturing jobs in New Orleans declined in every year except one. By 1977, only 11 per cent of the labour force was employed in manufacturing, a situation that placed the city among the lowest in industrial employment in the nation (Smith and Keller, 1986). While the suburban areas grew in population, the population of the central city of New Orleans dropped from 627 000 in 1960 to 557 000 in 1980. The city lost 34 000 residents during the 1960s and more than 35 000 during the 1970s, a population decline that

contributed to eroding tax revenue and fiscal crisis. Racially, New Orleans's public school system became majority African American in 1970, the result of bitter school desegregation litigation that motivated Whites to send their children to private schools and move from the central city to the suburbs (Whelan *et al.*, 1994). In 1978, Ernest (Dutch) Morial became the first African American mayor of the city, thus inaugurating a new era of enhanced political power for Black politicians and institutions (Whelan, 1987). By 1980, African Americans had eclipsed Whites as the dominant racial group in New Orleans making up 54.5 per cent of the population compared with Whites who comprised 40.3 per cent of the city's population.

Early discussions for hosting a world's fair came in the late 1960s and early 1970s when a state-wide coalition of business leaders formed the Council for a Better Louisiana (CABL) to combat the state's economic downturn and attract new sources of capital investment. CABL lamented that

In the economic outlook for Louisiana, a hard fact is that the production of oil and gas which has supported much business activity is on the downturn. Reserves are being depleted, and the state needs to promote other bases for economic growth such as tourism (Frank S. Craig, Jr).<sup>1</sup>

A major tourism development strategy chosen by the CABL, state leaders and other élites was to stage an international exposition as a major catalyst to restructure the state and local economies, emphasising tourism and consumption-based economic activities. In 1975, economic and political élites with the support of Governor Edwin Edwards created a steering committee to investigate the possibility of hosting a world's fair in New Orleans in 1980. This committee eventually developed into the private, non-profit Louisiana World Exposition, Inc. (LWE) to plan and finance an exposition through a public-private

partnership between the state, city and local business élite. From the beginning, the LWE intended a world's fair to be privately run and publicly financed, with the private sector taking a command-and-control position and the public sector playing an ostensibly marginal and subservient role. In 1976, local developer Lester Kabacoff asserted that the exposition must be "run by businessmen, but with the cooperation of the city and state" (Presley, 1976). During these years, political and economic élites argued that a world's fair could stimulate and accelerate the construction of a major convention centre, a national park, a science-oriented museum, the redevelopment of dilapidated neighbourhoods and bring other residuals that would boost the sagging local and state economies.

A collegial association and cordial report characterised the relationship between the federal government, the state of Louisiana, the LWE and the city of New Orleans in early planning efforts for the exposition. The election of Ronald Reagan and the transition to a new presidential administration in 1980 introduced new instabilities into the bid process as federal officials voiced strong reservations about the financial viability of a world's fair in New Orleans. Although the Bureau of International Expositions (BIE) in Paris approved the Louisiana Exposition in 1981, the Reagan administration was not enthusiastic about the exposition and voiced little support for the fair. Begrudgingly, President Reagan approved only \$10 million for the US pavilion for exhibitions and other expenses, unlike the \$20 million the federal government had allocated for its Knoxville pavilion for the 1982 world's fair (Hagan, 1994). This ceiling on federal spending removed an important public-sector funding mechanism for the Louisiana exposition and inaugurated a new era of federal defunding and non-support for US world's fairs. In addition, the Reagan administration refused to allow the LWE to issue invitations

to potential foreign participants until March 1982, less than three months before opening of the world's fair in Knoxville, KY, for fear of limiting the number of participants in Expo '82. By this time, the Commissioners-General for both the Japanese Expo, scheduled for 1985, and Vancouver's Expo '86 had commitments from a dozen nations before the LWE had signed even one. Adding to New Orleans' exposition woes, at the beginning of 1984, the White House informed the LWE that President Ronald Reagan would not attend to open the fair, thus depriving the fair of needed positive opening-day national publicity. Unlike past US world's fairs which had a significant amount of federal and corporate support, the New Orleans Exposition was forced to organise itself as an attendance-driven exposition with financial success totally dependent on achieving the 12 million visitor projection.

Despite these setbacks, fair officials argued that the 1984 world's fair would be "a once-in-lifetime experience ... a catalyst for tremendous economic impact", according to Petr Spurney, Executive Vice President and General Manager (Massa, 1980). City and state officials and exposition organisers decided to locate the fair on an 82-acre site along the Mississippi River, adjacent to the central business district and encompassing the historical Warehouse District. The theme 'Rivers of the World—Fresh Water as a Source of Life' reflected the United Nation's designation of the 1980s as the Decade of International Drinking Water and Sanitation. Local architects and planners promised a "temporary magic kingdom" and predicted that the exposition would transform the Mississippi riverfront "into a world of pavilions, lagoons, rides, watercourses, floats, exhibits, entertainment, cuisine and music" (*Times-Picayune*, 1981a). Billboards proclaimed that New Orleans would be the "most exciting place on earth". A permanent \$88 million Exhibition and

Convention Center formed the centrepiece of the fairgrounds and several corporations including Liggett and Meyers Tobacco and Chrysler erected major pavilions. Joining the US with exhibits of the history, industry and culture of the world of rivers were more than a dozen foreign nations, including Australia, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, France, Italy, Japan, Liberia, Mexico, China, Korea, Peru, England and West Germany. One of the major architectural features of the fair included the Wonderwall, a half-mile-long midway that featured a variety of architecture themes and historical motifs with shops, food booths, stages, video arcades and rest areas. Other notable features included a 10-car, 146-passenger monorail that circled the exposition grounds every 12 minutes and a gondola ride that took passengers on 2200-foot cable trips across the Mississippi River (*Times-Picayune*, 1981b; Osborne, 1984).<sup>2</sup>

Yet beneath the patina of exposition advertising and hype, however, lurked the palimpsest of government discord and antagonistic relations between the private and public sectors. Federal defunding and lack of national government support for the 1984 exposition spawned anti-fair discontent, exacerbated conflicts between the local and state governments, and intensified uncertainty for fair supporters and pro-growth advocates. At the local level, financing problems and disagreements over who should control the fair planning process aggravated tensions between the LWE and the New Orleans City Council. During the early 1980s, city officials and Mayor Ernst (Dutch) Morial assailed the LWE for its undemocratic and autocratic decision-making, pervasive lack of transparency and overall non-effort in reaching out to the city and soliciting community participation in exposition planning. Councilmen Mike Early, Joseph Giarusso, Sidney Barthelemy and Jim Singleton, whose district included the exposition fairgrounds, became strong opponents of the LWE. Along with Mayor Morial, these

city council members castigated the LWE and fair organisers for refusing to hire racial minorities and low-income people to work at the fair and for awarding a disproportionate number of contracts to out-of-state firms (*Times-Picayune*, 1983a, 1983c). Despite the fact that the city had spent millions on infrastructure improvements, the LWE adopted the stance that the exposition was a purely 'private venture' that was risking capital and resources to help revitalise New Orleans. "When we approach the fair", according to councilman Sidney Barthelemy, "we're told it's a private venture" (*Times-Picayune*, 1983b). When challenged by city leaders to help lobby the state for more money for New Orleans to support the fair, the LWE maintained that they did not have the political expertise or credibility to lobby for more state aid for the city, a position that angered the mayor and city council.

Disagreements and conflicts between the LWE and government officials intensified during 1983 and 1984 as lacklustre ticket sales plunged the exposition into financial turmoil. Cash-flow problems began to mount in December 1983 when it became clear that only one-third of projected revenue from season ticket sales was coming in. Two months later, the LWE exhausted its entire \$55 million in bank credits and could not pay its bills due to the inadequate advance ticket sales. By April 1984, the LWE had moved into crisis management and was forced to seek an additional \$10 million from the State of Louisiana to cover expenses. A month later, the LWE lowered the price for ticket admissions and fired its marketing director because of a spiralling debt of \$14 million and an inability to pay contractors. When the LWE was unable to pay the city \$3.8 million in taxes, the New Orleans City Council seized the fair's bank accounts, a situation that made it impossible for the LWE to issue paycheques to 2000 fair employees. Because the LWE placed repayment of a \$15

million bank loan as its top financial priority, the organisation let its construction debts stagnate, pushing many construction firms towards bankruptcy. Later in June, under pressure from Governor Edwin Edwards, the Louisiana State Legislature reluctantly approved a \$17.5 million loan to rescue the exposition (*Times-Picayune*, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c, 1984d).

As part of the loan deal, Governor Edwards restructured the fair's finances by taking the control of monies out of the private LWE and assigning financial control to himself, Mayor Morial and several contractors, banks and accountants. Edwards' reorganisation plan marginalised the LWE and actively involved the state and city governments in the financial and logistical operations of the exposition. Interestingly, Edwards and Morial did not request the resignation of Petr Spruney, LWE Executive Vice President and General Manager, but kept him "around because his presence reminds the public who put the crisis-ridden fair together and who is leading the rescue mission", according to one interpretation at the time (Katz 1984). Under the new restructuring plan, exploited contractors could choose either to lose some money and agree not to sue the LWE, or choose to sue the LWE and potentially receive nothing through litigation. Specifically, by signing an agreement not to file suit, contractors received about 60 per cent of the money owed them; by refusing to sign, contractors could sue but were not guaranteed anything at all. Although more than two-thirds of the contractors signed the agreement, press coverage at the time reported deep animosity, resentment and enmity towards the world's fair by contractors, many of whom were local vendors with short-term capital reserves (*Times-Picayune*, 1984e, 1984f).

By the end of the summer, cash-flow problems became chronic as attendance continued to lag (International Trade Administration, 1985, p. 10). From the outset, attendance

averaged some 35–40 per cent below projections, putting pressure on exposition organisers to lower ticket prices to boost attendance and increase sales. The threat of lay-offs haunted the lives of contractors and employees throughout the summer and autumn as projected revenues failed to meet actual revenues. Despite a massive \$7 million advertising campaign launched both in the US and around the world to attract visitors, fewer than 7.5 million people attended the fair from its opening on 12 May through to 11 November 1984—a small number compared with expositions held in Montreal (1967), San Antonio (1968) and Vancouver (1986) (see Table 1). With \$100 million in debts owed to 750 creditors, the Louisiana Exposition closed on 11 November under a shadow of negative publicity and financial ruin, the only US world's fair ever to declare bankruptcy (see Table 2).

### Racial Conflict and the Politics of Spectacle

In the *Society of the Spectacle* and other essays, Debord often presents his conception of the spectacle as a monolithic juggernaut, an irresistible force of cultural hegemony that dominates society from the

**Table 1.** North American international expositions (world's fairs), 1962–86

<i>Site/year</i>	<i>Attendance</i>
Seattle 1962	9 639 969
New York 1964–65	27 000 000 (in 1964) 51 607 307 (in 1965)
Montreal 1967	50 000 000+
San Antonio 1968	64 000 000
Spokane 1974	5 249 130
Knoxville 1982	11 127 786
New Orleans 1984	7 335 279
Vancouver 1986	22 111 578

*Source:* The world's fair and exposition information and reference guide ([http://www.earthstation9.com/worlds\\_2.htm](http://www.earthstation9.com/worlds_2.htm); accessed 15 April 2008).

top–down. It is this imagery that has led to the emergence of several critiques of the work of Debord, including claims that he overemphasised class and failed to take into account the everyday life of other sectors of the population, most notably women and ethnic minorities (Jay, 1993, p. 431). Other critiques include Debord's failure to specify clearly the different forms, types and technologies of spectacle, and his lack of attention to the duality of agency and structure. Finally, Debord never adequately theorised the crisis tendencies and diverse forms of

**Table 2.** Attendance, revenue and costs for the 1984 Louisiana Exposition

	<i>Projected<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Actual</i>	<i>Change</i>
Attendance	12 000 000	7 335 279	–4 700 000
Ticket revenue (\$)	113 500 000	54 100 000	–59 400 000
Cost per person per ticket (\$)	9 500 000	7 380 000	–2 120 000
Salaries (\$)	19 760 000	19 460 000	–300 000
Payroll taxes, benefits (\$)	3 130 000	2 270 000	–860 000
Site operating costs (\$)	7 980 000	11 930 000	3 950 000
Travel and entertainment costs (\$)	1 890 000	1 860 000	–30 000
Consulting fees (\$)	4 820 000	6 770 000	1 950 000
Total expenses (\$)	187 700 000	197 100 000	9 400 000
Total revenue (\$)	200 000 000	108 000 000	–92 000 000

<sup>a</sup>April 1984 figure presented to the Louisiana State Legislature.  
*Source:* *Times-Picayune*, 6 October 1985; Hagan (1994, p. 97).

collective resistance that characterise modern capitalism (Gardiner, 2000, pp. 124–125; Jappe, 1999, pp. 103–104; for an overview, see Gotham and Krier, 2008). Finally, in his later work, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* published in 1988, Debord's characterisation of the spectacle is one of gloom and deep cultural pessimism. Unlike the possibility of radical social change that he proclaimed in the *Society of the Spectacle*, by 1988, his optimism had descended into despair as he suggests that resistance is futile since the spectacle has assimilated and co-opted all instances of potential challenge and has become a formidable and absolute power.

Against the theoretical and analytical limitations of Debord's work, a more multidimensional and nuanced approach recognises the conflictual and contradictory nature of different spectacles and seeks to identify and clarify the sources of opposition and resistance to spectacle. Such a conception rejects views that consumers are passive 'recipients' of commodity images or cultural dupes that are 'seduced' and 'distracted' by the titillating images of entertainment and spectacle. In contrast, it is useful to view people as active agents who interpret spectacles in a variety of different ways and often challenge corporate attempts to constitute them as passive spectators. Rather than viewing spectacle as an *a priori* category or as a social relationship of commodity images, we recognise that there are a plurality of different spectacles where powerful economic and political interests often have to defend what they would prefer to have taken for granted. To paraphrase Henri Lefebvre (1991, 1979), whereas the state policies and corporate actions seek to 'pulverise' space into abstract and manageable spectacles of consumption, diverse social forces simultaneously attempt to create, defend or extend 'social space', the everyday life of people. While the production of spectacles connects to issues of political and

economic power, the interpretation of spectacles is filtered through prior experience, one's social location and identity (race, class, gender and so on) and one's conversations and engagement with others. Understanding the ways in which spectacles can generate opposition requires that we address the ways in which the context of reception influences the consumption of spectacle, how different groups and individuals represent and interpret spectacles, and how people often use spectacles for purposes that are unforeseen and deeply opposed by the producers of spectacle.

One major axis of social conflict at the 1984 Louisiana Exposition revolved around the cultivation of an African American identity that interlocked with local mobilisations to undermine the stigma of Blackness and claim new bases of cultural authenticity. During the years leading up to the 1984 exposition, African American officials and civil rights activists attempted to use the fair planning and redevelopment process to advocate for more resources to Black neighbourhoods. When LWE resisted these efforts, local activists assailed the organisation, claiming that New Orleans residents and neighbourhoods were being victimised and exploited by a racist and anti-demographic pro-growth coalition. After Mayor Morial won election in 1982, the mayor expressed that White élites were patronising and showed little to no interest in working with him to mend the city's longstanding racial divisions. As Morial remarked

I don't know why people want me to deal politically different than any other mayor. Is it because I'm a nigger? Because I'm a nigger, I've got to be shat on by everyone else? (Lemann, 1987).

Racial conflicts over the fair reached a crescendo in 1982 when Rev. Jesse Jackson joined Morial and the City Council in criticising the LWE as a secretive and

dictatorial organisation. The world's fair "has a choice of dealing with the black community as trading partners or as civil warriors", proclaimed Jackson. New Orleans' African American population

ought not to have demean itself by begging for menial jobs or negotiating for a few entrepreneurial opportunities. We have the people and we have the capital (J. Jackson, *Times-Picayune*, 1982a).

Jackson's protests were amplified by City Councilman Jim Singleton who denounced the LWE for hiring only a few Blacks for staff positions and none at the executive level. As Singleton elaborated

It's my belief that the fair doesn't want to hire blacks right now. My message to the fair is that hiring blacks isn't as optional as they seem to think it is (J. Singleton, *Times-Picayune*, 1982b).

Racial protest and animosity typified the planning and staging of the 1984 Louisiana Exposition as African American activists mobilised to challenge their exclusion from the world's fair. In February 1984, several African American artists threatened to launch a class action suit against the LWE "to address the reprehensible and blatant omission of Black artists in the proposed exhibition, 'Louisiana: Major Works 84'". Protesting against "the inadequate local representation of the Blacks arts community", Black artists assailed exposition planners for selecting only one African American out of 51 artists to represent Louisiana art. "We don't think it is equitable", according to one artist, "to suggest to the 'world' that this one person is the total of Black artists in Louisiana of importance". During the months of the exposition, local artists wrote letters, lobbied city council members and displayed artwork protesting the decision of fair planners and organisers not to include more African American artists in the fair.

According to a letter sent by several artists to Mayor Morial

Each time a Black artist or civic person is asked to sit on a board we have never seen it as any more than a duty and challenge to link the communities ... We went to the 'right' schools; stayed abreast of current attitudes and developments in Art; stayed in our studios improving our crafts ... To have given to this arts community unselfishly time, expertise, and what little finances we have and to be excluded will certainly no longer be tolerated.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the mobilisation of African American artists reflected an emerging cultural consciousness that emphasised the artistic contributions of Blacks to New Orleans history and culture. In this sense, the exposition became a medium for the communication of political dissent and a cultural battlefield in which activists manoeuvred and struggled to challenge the racial *status quo*. The 1980s were a time of profound racial struggle in New Orleans, which emerged from the 1950s and 1960s with the civil rights movement, between those who were promoting racial justice and inclusive multiculturalism against those who asserted class and racial privilege and fought to preserve the racial colour line (Hirsch, 1992). Reflecting a broader civil rights struggle against racial segregation and inequality, Black artists and cultural organisations agitated for social justice and broader recognition of the wide range of African American cultural contributions. For African American artists, the 1984 Louisiana Exposition sufficed as a political vehicle for Black protest as well as a forum to challenge social marginalisation and further resistant agendas.

Through protest, African American leaders and activists used the exposition as an outlet for political contestation and cultural expression. A major effect of this increased attention was the elaboration of new cultural knowledge that positioned African Americans as stewards of New Orleans culture. As result of protest and mobilisation, Black leaders were

successful in pressing state legislators to create the Louisiana Black Culture Commission and the Division of Black Culture in late 1984. Six years later, in 1990, 13 African American business owners established the Black Tourism Network (BTN) to increase opportunities for African Americans in the tourism industry. In 1996, the state of Louisiana created the multicultural branch of the Louisiana Office of Tourism to work with the BTN in identifying historical African American sites and hosting a major multicultural tourism summit. These developments represented the formation of new organisations to raise awareness of African American heritage and create an inclusive conception of urban culture that portrayed the Black community as a major participant in the historical development of New Orleans.

## Discussion

The 1984 Louisiana Exposition was a major spectacle that presented stark contrasts and profound ambivalences as event publicity, advertising and rational planning and organisation could not deliver a well attended, entertaining and profitable fair. In terms of its relationship to New Orleans, the 1984 exposition raised disquieting questions concerning the role of tourism as strategy of urban regeneration in a city besieged by massive deindustrialisation and loss of quality jobs in the chemical and petroleum industries. Critics argued that the exposition's residual products such as riverfront development, new corporate hotel chains and reinvestment in the Warehouse District did little to address wider social problems, including neighbourhood disinvestment, racial polarisation and skyrocketing rents (*Times-Picayune*, 1983d, 1983e). For critics, exposition attractions and other tourism developments seemed increasingly divorced from the problems and concerns of the city's neighbourhoods and working people (Smith and Keller, 1986;

Hirsch, 1983; Whelan and Young, 1991; for an overview, see Gotham, 2007).

The social conflicts and unrest at the 1984 Louisiana Exposition did not occur in a vacuum, but were present in the 1982 Knoxville Exposition and foreseen and anticipated in the planning of the failed 1992 world's fair in Chicago. Despite attracting more than 11 million visitors to the 1982 Knoxville Exposition, city leaders were forced to raise taxes to cover a public debt of \$57 million left over from the fair. In 1982, the day after the Knoxville Fair closed, federal bank examiners seized 22 local banks and later declared nine to be insolvent. The collapse of these banks was the largest series of bank failures in the US at the time since the Great Depression. In May 1984, during the staging of the Louisiana Exposition, the *New York Times* reported that, 20 months after the closing of the 1982 world's fair, the city of Knoxville was left with a "desolate legacy" of empty buildings, a deserted fair site and dashed expectations. "In terms of what the promoters promised it would do for Knoxville", said Joseph Dodd, a professor of political science at the University of Tennessee, "the fair can only be described as a bust" (Schmidt, 1984).

The criticisms over the fair planning process coupled with grassroots opposition at the 1982 and 1984 world's fairs had contagion effects as negative publicity about Knoxville and New Orleans mobilised anti-fair opposition, divided fair supporters and eventually killed efforts to stage a 1992 world's fair in Chicago. As early as 1982, Mayor Jane Byrne's administration had incorporated a proposed plan for a 1992 world's fair into the Chicago comprehensive plan. Yet, in June 1985, six months after the closing of the 1984 Louisiana Exposition, the Illinois state legislature refused to appropriate money to finance the fair, describing the proposed fair as "misguided, risky, and fatally flawed" (quoted in Shlay and Giloth, 1987, p. 318). The financial difficulties of the New Orleans exposition

combined with dwindling federal resources for fair planning shifted the public dialogue in Chicago towards greater scrutiny of the costs and potential financial consequences of the 1992 fair. As political and economic élites and the pro-fair growth coalition struggled to find a plausible formula of costs and benefits, critics posed tough questions about who would benefit and who would suffer; launched academic studies on infrastructure and environmental impact; highlighted the problems in Knoxville and New Orleans; and used local media outlets and public review hearings to voice concerns.

The election of African American mayor Harold Washington in 1983 and a more open Chicago City Council helped to fuel the flames of anti-fair opposition and legitimate increased public scrutiny. Like Dutch Morial in New Orleans, Harold Washington was not a firm supporter of the fair and he continually hammered the point that the city would not bear the brunt of cost overruns or attendance shortfalls. In Chicago, escalating project costs and requirements, insufficient or uncertain project benefits, lack of federal resources and support constrained fair planning and contributed to mounting political opposition that subsequently doomed plans to host an international exposition (Rydell *et al.*, 2000, pp. 128–130; Shlay and Giloth, 1987). Chicago's proposed 1992 fair failed because of the lack of federal largesse and non-support for the fair, weaknesses within the pro-growth coalition, and community and political opposition. In both New Orleans and Chicago, public criticism and opposition mounted as the actual costs of the fair became public and understood by city leaders and residents.

## Conclusion

This paper has focused on the contradictions of urban spectacles as expressed in the tendency of mega events to foment opposition, generate collective mobilisation and complicate local

efforts to promote sustainable development. The 1984 Louisiana Exposition foreshadowed an emerging era of intensified conflict and struggle over the world's fair planning and redevelopment process. The lack of federal assistance coupled with the market-driven nature of the exposition magnified conflicts between the federal, state and local governments, fragmented the growth coalition that had guided the planning of the fair since the 1970s and bankrupted local vendors. Members of the LWE and other exposition supporters argued that the exposition would generate long-term benefits for the city and state in the form of increased tourism-oriented redevelopment and abundant tax revenue. Yet poor attendance coupled with massive financial losses—a direct result of federal non-support—heightened social conflict and undermined the credibility and legitimacy of élite claims that the fair would turn a profit. Indeed, what started out as a privately run international exposition receiving minimal support from the government became a financially insolvent world's fair dependent on government resources and public-sector assistance. The spectre of financial bankruptcy and social conflict complicated planning efforts in Chicago for a 1992 exposition as increased public scrutiny of costs mobilised community and political opposition to the proposed fair. By the mid 1980s, world's fairs had entered a hiatus in the US as national leaders no longer supported large federal expenditures for mega events and increasingly pressured cities to develop their own policies to leverage investment for urban redevelopment.

Overall, the planning and staging of the 1984 Louisiana Exposition provides insight into the role of spectacles in expressing and displaying highly contradictory representations that can generate intense conflict and contestation. Unlike the past, where opposition to mega events was often muted or exceptional, today we witness the proliferation of a variety of mobilisations and sustained protests led by

opposition coalitions dedicated to drawing global attention to the inequities and anti-democratic nature of spectacles. Diverse forms of dissent are now spreading internationally to sports spectacles like the Olympics as opponents use spectacle to raise alarm concerning the negative effect of event preparations on indigenous people (COHRE, 2007). Whitelegg's (2000) examination of the criminalisation of the homeless in Atlanta during the 2004 Olympic Games, Waitt's (1999) study of environmental degradation and post-colonial racism in Sydney's 2000 Olympic bid and Salt Lake City's complicity in a bribery scandal over the bid for the 2002 Winter Olympics have raised troubling questions surrounding the suffering and misery that mega events bring to cities. Chinese officials' harsh response to protests in Tibet in March 2008 brought an intense wave of accusations that corporate sponsors of the Beijing Olympics were partners with a corrupt government that ignores basic human rights. In April 2008, thousands of demonstrators forced the cancellation of the last leg of the Olympic torch ceremony in Paris with repeated disruptions of the procession, escalating international protests over China's human rights record ahead of the 2008 Games in Beijing. Further disruptions of the torch relay in London, San Francisco and other cities were unprecedented in their scope and organisation and underscore the deep divide between many national governments that are developing trade ties with China and citizens who argue that China's lack of political freedom is incompatible with the values enshrined in the Olympic charter. World-wide, critics have been unrelenting in their scrutiny of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Olympic sponsors, a development that intimates the Olympics as both a venue of mass marketing and political protest.

For US cities, spectacles are becoming conspicuously associated with disruption and resistance, as the process of re-imagining space is creating new basing points, strategic targets and weak spots. Sports mega events, tourist

attractions and stadium-building almost always generate huge cost overruns, escalating project requirements, and unclear or unpersuasive short-term and long-term community benefits (Delaney and Eckstein, 2003; Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006; Eisinger, 2000; Lowes, 2002). Forms of financing that rely on huge public subsidies to private developers have become sources of community opposition in an era of fiscal retrenchment and eroding federal and state aid to cities. Much research has shown that sports mega events, stadiums and tourism spectacles tend to be developed largely by undemocratic organisations with autocratic decision-making and a pervasive lack of transparency (Delaney and Eckstein, 2003; for an overview, see Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006). The tendency by political and economic élites to overstate the potential economic benefits of hosting sports events and building convention centres and stadiums has been well documented by researchers who have examined mega-event redevelopment in Europe, the US and China (Broudehoux, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2007; Gospodini, 2009; Smith and Fox, 2007). As noted by Delaney and Eckstein (2003), tourism boosters now regularly argue for and justify huge public subsidies for stadiums and other spectacles on the grounds that a major mega event and entertainment economy will solve social problems by building community solidarity and enhancing community self-esteem. Others have suggested that escalating urban competition and 'bidding wars' to host mega events and attract tourism investment result in overaccumulation and the threat of devaluation, and have

the marks of a zero-sum game or worse, a negative-sum game, in which the winner ultimately becomes the loser (Kotler *et al.*, 1993, p. 15).

These developments have galvanised local opposition groups and provided a window of political opportunity for activists to advocate for social justice and a more inclusive and democratic

decision-making process. Clearly, spectacles do not affect audiences in a simplistic top-down or one-way causal fashion, but instead proliferate contradictory effects by generating a bewildering array of symbols and motifs which individuals and groups can appropriate in diverse ways. Rather than characterising spectacles as instruments of hegemony, it makes more sense to view spectacles as arenas of contestation connected to struggles against exploitation and inequality. People's experiences with spectacles can thus be seen as symbolic indicators of wider transformations in urban society involving contests over access to and control over material and cultural resources. Spectacles do not just exude pleasurable consuming experiences and entertainment values, but can articulate class, race, gender and other political issues and controversies, especially those connected with the social construction of space, culture and heritage. The struggle for recognition, rights and benefits among different groups is thus central to the production, representation and consumption of spectacle.

Finally, I want to suggest that a critical theory of spectacle can sensitise us to the complex, contradictory and conflictual nature of mega events, new forms of consumption, entertainment and tourism. Today, the ubiquity of the mega-event strategy, the growth of globalised entertainment and the proliferation of tourism spectacles suggest a process of standardisation and rationalisation that is reinforcing trends towards cultural homogeneity and uniformity, the serial production of urban space in David Harvey's (1989) famous formulation. On the other hand, new globalised forms of cultural production and consumption are fomenting currents of critical opposition and new forms of resistance, thus nurturing diversity, variety and hybridity. One advantage of the both/and conception of spectacle I have used in this paper is that it can help us to grasp that mega events and other urban spectacles are forces of both homogeneity and heterogeneity, thus helping us to avoid reductionist explanations. Future critical research on mega events and urban

spectacles could examine the interaction of both macro and micro levels to understand how different governments and political organisations work with economic élites and private interests to produce spectacles; how different marketers and advertising agents use images and theming strategies to represent spectacles; which groups and interests oppose different spectacles; and which contending groups use spectacles to advance their own resistant agendas. Analysing the different dimensions of spectacle also means exploring what social identities are connected with different spectacles, how people use and consume spectacles to reinforce or challenge identity categories and what mechanisms regulate the distribution and use of particular spectacles. In this sense, while particular spectacles are produced by a combination of local power interests and multinational corporations, and regulated by various governmental frameworks, it is also necessary to explore the lived consumer experience and the role of human agents in shaping meanings and representations of different spectacles. Finally, a critical and multidimensional approach to analysing mega events could expose the theoretical limitations of rival explanations that refuse to probe critically the social relations underlying the production and consumption of spectacle. These theoretical advantages can help to identify the key actors and organised interests involved in manufacturing cultural signifiers and to interrogate and explain the consequences of the actions of powerful groups, thereby pointing to possibilities for progressive societal transformation.

## Notes

1. Letter from Frank S. Craig, Jr, President, Council for a Better Louisiana, to the Honorable Secretary of Commerce, Washington, DC, 31 January 1977 (Records of the 1984 Louisiana Exposition, City Archives. New Orleans Public Library).
2. See also: *Annual Reports of the Louisiana World Exposition, Inc.* 1981, 1982, 1983; *Exposition World*, vol. 1, issue 2, March 1982 (MS 553,

Box 26, Mary Meeks Morrison and Jacob Morrison Papers, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA).

3. Letter from John T. Scott *et al.* to Honorable Ernest N. Morial, Mayor *et al.*, 10 February 1984; letter from Mrs Jo Griffin Web to Mrs Noelle LeBlanc *et al.*, 10 February 1984 (Box 72, folder 2, Arts Council of New Orleans; Subject Files: Exposition 1984, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library).

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