CENTURY 21 WORLD'S FAIR (courtesy of https://www.seattle.gov)

The Century 21 Exposition - also known as the Seattle World's Fair - was held between April 21 and October 21, 1962 drew almost 10 million visitors. A defining moment in the history of Seattle, this fair began life as the brainchild of City Councilman Al Rochester. By 1955, the councilman had generated considerable interest in his idea from decision makers at the state and city level, and in January Washington's legislature allocated $5,000 for a small commission to study the feasibility of such a fair. Public excitement, spurred on by effective advertisement, soon gave the project further momentum; in 1957 Seattle voters passed a $7.5 million Civic Center bond for possible fairground development, an amount which was then matched by the legislature.

The newly-expanded Commission of 1957 decided on a theme for the Fair centered on modern science, space exploration, and the progressive future, wrapped in the broad concept of a 'Century 21 Exposition.' A 28-acre parcel of city-owned land near Queen Anne Hill was eventually chosen for the site of the Fair over larger and more nominally attractive sites such as Fort Lawton (800 acres) and Sand Point Naval Air Station (350 acres). The site's proximity to the downtown area, as well as the interest in converting the Exposition's permanent facilities into a Civic Center after the fair made this location attractive to the planners.

Early planning continued into 1960, when the Century 21 Commission, after considerable lobbying, secured from the International Bureau of Expositions a certification as an official World's Fair. International confirmation provided a powerful legitimacy among the various entities the Fair's representatives sought to attract as funders and exhibit-builders. Enticed by the publicity possibilities inherent in the millions of fair-goers projected to appear, several giants of American business decided to sponsor exhibits in the 'World of Commerce and Industry' section of the Exposition, including Ford Motor Company, Boeing, and Bell Telephone.

The US Government, for its part, was exceedingly interested in demonstrating the nation's scientific prowess to the world, and so committed over $9 million to the fair, chiefly to build the NASA-themed United States Science Exhibit (now the Pacific Science Center). A number of foreign governments provided the international flavor crucial to a World's Fair, and eventually 35 states signed on as exhibitors. The tense geopolitical mood of the early 1960s, however, limited involvement of the Communist states; the Soviet Union declined to participate, and the People's Republic of China, North Vietnam, and North Korea were not invited.

To coordinate the overarching blueprint of all these exhibits, respected designer Paul Thiry was hired as chief architect of the Exposition. Thiry was also tapped to design the Washington State Pavilion (now the KeyArena), the conceptual centerpiece of the 'World of Tomorrow' section. Under the supervision of Thiry, the World's Fair Commission, and the city's Civic Center Advisory Committee, the ideas and plans of many differing minds began to take shape in the fairgrounds at the base of Queen Anne Hill, gradually creating an aesthetically adventurous cityscape intended to excite the visitor with futuristic visions of scientific progress.

Reinforcing this sense of futurism was the ultra-modern Monorail line developed to ferry tourists from downtown Seattle to the fairgrounds. Those searching for more conventional entertainments would be catered to as well, with the construction of the 'Gayway' (a small amusement park that would become the Fun Forest) and 'Show Street' (the "adult entertainment" section, featuring a number of bars, restaurants, and nightclubs). The visual centerpiece of the fair, ultimately, would also become an icon of Seattle: the Space Needle. This 605-foot, $6.5 million rotating restaurant tower was considered a risky investment because of its grandiose dimensions and spectacular design. The needle was nonetheless wildly popular among fairgoers, and has remained a well-loved tourist attraction.

By April 1962, all that remained to be done was to open the doors to the public, which occurred during an extravagant opening ceremony on the 21st. Amidst 538 clanging bells, 2000 balloons, and 10 Air Force F-102 fighters swooping overhead, Exposition president Joseph Gandy officially opened Century 21 for business. For the next six months, visitors would be entertained not just by the many exhibits, but also by an array of musicians, orchestras, dance troupes, art collections, singers, comedians, and other various shows traveling through the fair during its run. Adding to the star-studded atmosphere was the presence of the 'King of Rock and Roll,' Elvis Presley, who arrived to shoot a film, It Happened at the World's Fair. Indeed, a number of celebrities came to the Exposition as tourists, including Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, Walt Disney, and Prince Phillip of Great Britain. By the close of the fair on October 21, a total of 9,609,969 people officially visited, largely satisfying attendance goals.

***City Involvement in Century 21***
Though the fair was primarily administered by the non-profit private Century 21 Exposition, Incorporated, the government of Seattle was deeply involved in development and execution. Once preparations began in earnest in 1957, substantial efforts were made to integrate the planning of the municipal, state, and private entities involved. Planner Evan Dingwall, for example, simultaneously held the directorships of the Washington State World's Fair Commission and Seattle Civic Center Advisory Committee, and would later serve as general manager of Century 21 Exposition, Inc. For its part, this Advisory Committee wielded substantial influence on the design process, reflecting the long-term goal of creating a viable core of facilities for a post-Exposition Civic Center. Thanks in part to this advocacy, Seattle would inherit 400,000 square feet of permanent indoor exhibition space from the fair. In addition, the city government oversaw a number of fair-based building projects both within and beyond the fairgrounds, including the Monorail line, the International Fountain, and a 1,500-car garage along Mercer Street.

Individual branches of municipal government also pursued a range of initiatives necessitated or provoked by Century 21. The Mayor's Office, for one, spearheaded a Downtown Beautification program that encouraged the cleanup and renovation of prominent City facilities, such as firehouses and parks. The Board of Public Works conducted oversight and licensing for building projects underway on municipal land, and so was crucial to the design and construction of fair exhibits. In 1960, $537,000 was approved to construct and install underground lighting facilities in the Century 21 site and vicinity; this involved removing approximately three and half miles of overhead pole lines. The projected influx of 10 million fairgoers prompted the Engineering Department to undertake a significant slate of improvements to the downtown transportation network, in addition to the needed incorporation of the fairgrounds into the water/ sewer utility system. Seattle City Light, finally, provided more than just the expected power to the Exposition; as a integral member of the Electric Utilities of Washington consortium, City Light played a pivotal role in developing the 'Pavilion of Electric Power,' a sizable exhibit featuring a 40-foot tall depiction of a hydroelectric dam.

***Controversy: Housing at the Fair***
The Century 21 Exposition has generally been considered a success by later commentators, though this does not mean it occurred without incident. A principal controversy arose from the perceived 'housing crunch' expected during the fair, as millions of tourists descend upon the city and rapidly fill up existing hotels and motels. Unless extraordinary action was taken, many felt, fair visitors would be turned away without accommodation, damaging the Exposition's reputation. As the City Council took steps to respond, such as permitting the use of docked 'marine vessels' as temporary lodgings, certain residential hotel owners sought to exploit the housing shortage. With little warning, these landlords converted their buildings, which often housed people who had resided there for years, from monthly rentals to daily. Thus, prices were raised significantly, effectively 'pricing out' long-term residents in favor of the more lucrative tourist trade. Understandably angered by their 'eviction,' many wrote emotional letters to the Mayor, City Council, and the Seattle press. Though the actual numbers of residents evicted remains unclear, public indignation ignited a heated debate over what the municipal government should do in response.

Public concern over landlord malfeasance climaxed in April, 1962. Pushed to respond, Mayor Gordon Clinton sent a proposal to the City Council calling on the establishment of an Emergency Hotel Licensing Board. This entity would issue licenses to temporary tourist hotels only if at least 90% of their rental units were committed to transient guests during April-October of 1961. This would, theoretically, provide further sources of fair accommodation while preventing the opportunistic eviction of hotel residents in long-term occupancy of their rooms. The proposal was passed as Council Ordinance 91079 on April 17.

The Licensing Board set to work quickly separating residential hotels from potential new accommodations, though it was already under fire for its dubious legality. On May 25th, Judge W.R. Cole ruled Ordinance 91079 invalid and unconstitutional. Though shut down after barely a month of existence, the Board served its political purposes by calming public fears of rampant evictions and demonstrating the municipality's resolve to punish those landlords who acted improperly. Ultimately, the Fair housing shortage that the property owners hoped to exploit never materialized; Seattle's accommodations proved sufficient throughout the Exposition. This was due, in large part, to the effective use of unoccupied apartment projects and docked cruise ships as temporary hotels, as well as the average stay of the fairgoer being shorter than originally projected.