

Front Page of The New York Times, as well as the Front Page of The Metro Section, on November 11th, 2006. Our campaign to save the New York State Pavilion was showcased.



November 11, 2006

ABOUT NEW YORK

We Have Seen the Future, and It Is Rusting

By **DAN BARRY**

Once there were elevators gliding up the sides of the towers to reveal a city unfolding; now they are rusted in mid-rise. Once there were stairwells winding within those towers; now they are rotted through. The call for a better tomorrow, for “Peace Through Understanding,” is answered by the flutter and coo of its hidden inhabitants.

Seeing again the New York State Pavilion, the massive space-age remnant of the 1964 World’s Fair that looms just beyond the Grand Central Parkway, seeing it in all its premature decrepitude, you cannot help but wonder: If this was built to evoke the future, then may the gods have mercy on us all.

The city’s neglect of this gift bequeathed to it in 1967 has long been a prominent embarrassment, the elephant in the room that is the borough of Queens.

But the more years that go by, the more the structure becomes New York’s own “colossal wreck,” begging, as Shelley wrote in “Ozymandias,” that we look upon it and despair.

During the summer the red warning light on the top of the highest tower, some 226 feet up, went out. It had to be quickly replaced, per federal regulations; La Guardia Airport is close by, after all. But the burnout of a small light presented a large problem for the pavilion’s custodian, the Department of Parks and Recreation.

With the elevators now stuck like barnacles to the sides of the towers, and with the stairwells rotted beyond use, parks officials had to hire a company that specializes in rappelling up buildings to conduct inspections and repairs. Which means, then, that

someone climbed up the futuristic edifice by rope to change that light bulb.

At the same time, beyond the “DANGER — KEEP OUT” signs, in the rotunda of the pavilion, an archaeological dig of sorts has been taking place in urban ruins less than 50 years old.

IT might be hard to imagine now, but back then the pavilion’s central feature was a detailed, 9,000-square-foot map of New York State, made of 567 terrazzo mosaic panels laid across the rotunda’s floor. Billed as the largest map in the world, it allowed you to stroll from Montauk Point to that small place in Cattaraugus County — Ischua, wasn’t it? — where you had an aunt.

Soon after taking custody, the city turned this meticulous map into a roller rink. A few years later, city workers disassembled the glorious multicolored ceiling by hammering out the heavy panels, sending them crashing to the floor.

On and on the willful neglect continued, abetted by fiscal crises, until, finally, you could visit the ruined map and slip the I from Ischua into your pocket.

Graduate students from the [University of Pennsylvania](#) are now collecting and cataloging the loose pieces of terrazzo and plastic, and are planning to restore some of the map for an exhibition next year. The thrust of the exhibition, presumably: This is what it looked like, way back then — in 1964.

The World’s Fair rose from the ash heap of Queens, immortalized in Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby,” to become a bazaar of international promise. When it was over, its master builder, [Robert Moses](#), presented the fairgrounds to the city. His words, part warning, part plea, now haunt: “Guard it well.”

The city promptly began to guard the pavilion poorly, so that by the time the current parks administration came into office, in 2001, it had become a rusting monument to civic failure that would cost millions to restore.

The Parks Department prefers to emphasize the \$422 million that the city and private organizations have invested in recent years in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, which includes the fairgrounds and the Unisphere. This money is dedicated to serving the public best, a parks spokesman says, as with a new \$60 million skating rink and indoor pool.

As for the pavilion, the spokesman, Warner Johnston, says the department solicited ideas from nonprofit organizations a couple of years ago but received no viable recommendations. Now it plans to solicit bids for what he called “a full stability and renovation report.”

“It’s all phony,” spits David Oats. “It’s been a frustrating — literally! — 40 years now.”

Nearly 45 years ago he was a boy living on the park’s fringe, watching and resenting the construction of the World’s Fair.

One day he was caught where he shouldn’t have been and was all but presented like a caught mouse at the feet of Moses. Moses took pity, assured the boy that the fair would be wonderful, gave him sketches of the promise to be and became a kind of mentor.

For 40 years, as the president of a civic association dedicated to the park and the legacy of the World’s Fair, Mr. Oats has seen too many studies and plans go nowhere. So little has been done — just as Moses privately predicted to him — that he suspects the city would rather demolish the structure and be done with it.

Mr. Oats, 57, stands before the pavilion, where the rusting elevator cables quiver in the wind. He points out the three observation decks. One was for the public, he says, one was for a restaurant, and one was for Governor Rockefeller to entertain dignitaries. He speaks like a grieving relative.

Of course, it was Mr. Oats who notified the authorities when the light went out.

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The rusting towers of the New York State Pavilion, a remnant of the 1964 World's Fair in Queens.

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The structure had a mosaic of New York State and a stained-glass ceiling. Birds now make nests in the structure.

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New York City took control of the pavilion in 1967 and since then, it has fallen into disrepair. At one point, a roller rink was built in it.

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During the summer, the red warning light on top of the highest tower went out.

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Because the elevators and stairwells were damaged beyond use, officials had to hire a company that specializes in rappelling up buildings to get the light fixed.

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