INTRODUCTION

Between April and October 1964, and again in 1965, a grand total of fifty-two million people from around the world gathered in Queens for the World's Fair. At the time, it was the most highly attended world's fair ever. Ostensibly held to honor the three hundredth anniversary of the naming of New York when King Charles II sent an English fleet to claim it from the Dutch, in truth the fair was an excuse to present a showcase of mid-twentieth-century American culture and technology. As Lawrence Samuel wrote in his retrospective, the event remains a touchstone for many American baby boomers, who visited the optimistic fair as children before the full impact of the countercultural social changes, the turbulence of the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War was felt.[1]

The man behind the fair was Robert Moses, who more than any other figure in the twentieth century shaped the physical environment of New York. A man with unimaginable energy, he at one time held simultaneously twelve positions, all appointed. From these posts, Moses expanded the state and city park systems, built highways, bridges, playgrounds, housing, tunnels, beaches, zoos, and civic centers, and, along the way, two world's fairs. Though he was vilified by the end of his lifetime, Moses's contributions are now deemed by some as needed.[2] He was renowned not just for his ambition and seemingly unlimited energy but also for his pugnaciousness and the less than diplomatic manner in which he treated those who crossed or merely disagreed with him. There was at least one person, however, to whom Moses extended every courtesy, and that was Cardinal Francis Spellman. Moses was "Bob" to Spellman, but Spellman was always "Your Eminence" to Moses.[3]

Born to a secular German Jewish family, Moses graduated from Yale and, standing over six feet tall, presented an imposing figure. Spellman, of Massachusetts Irish ancestry, was stocky in stature, studied in Rome to become a priest, and emerged a Prince of the Church.

Spellman was installed the sixth archbishop of New York in 1939, the same year Moses opened the first New York World's Fair. Like Moses, Cardinal Spellman wielded enormous political and cultural influence in New York City—and he was as savvy about the business of the church as he was about its mission. Spellman had quickly learned of the archdiocese's alarming financial state, with mortgages totaling close to $28 million. After a thorough analysis, he undertook a sweeping reorganization of the archdiocese by centralizing, then refinancing the debt at much more favorable terms. Initially the banks balked, but when Spellman suggested moving his banking to Boston, they quietly fell in line. Pastors, too, were reluctant to surrender their fiscal control, but the savings they saw outweighed any resistance. In essence, the archdiocese became the central bank for all church enterprises.

In 1947, Spellman made his expectations clear when he introduced his $25 million diocesan building plan to the presidents of the largest construction firms and the heads of the building and trades unions. He asked for two things—"from the construction companies, a good job for the price; and from labor, a good day's work for the pay."[4] He got both, and the archdiocesan building boom was on. To understand the magnitude of this new construction program, second only to the city's, consider the five-year period from 1955 to 1959, when new construction was begun on fifteen churches, ninety-four schools, twenty-two rectories, sixty convents, thirty institutions, and hundreds of additions, alterations, and repairs, totaling over $168 million, or more than $1.6 billion in today's dollars, adjusted for inflation. Since his tenure had begun in 1939, Spellman was also responsible for building a number of Catholic hospitals, as well as expanding the high school system.

Spellman asserted his control from the office of the chancery, housed in one of six Stanford White–designed neo-Renaissance Florentine mansions, one block over from St. Patrick's Cathedral, and modeled ironically after the Roman Palazzo della Cancelleria, the fifteenth-century papal chancery palace. From this command post, nicknamed "the Powerhouse," Spellman administered what was the wealthiest Catholic diocese in the world. Unlike Moses, however, Spellman wielded influence that extended well beyond New York—it was global. In addition to his role as military vicar and a sometimes confidant of President Franklin Roosevelt, he was responsible for the church's largest foreign aid program, Catholic Relief Services, with a 1964 budget of $176 million, well over $1.5 billion today. For his administrative and financial acuity, he acquired the nickname "Cardinal Moneybags" by some in Rome, and the world was better for it.[5]

For either man to accomplish his goals, working collaboratively was a necessity. A natural alliance formed between Moses and Spellman, as contractors and trades, just like the American church, were dominated by the Irish Catholics.[6] How did the Irish ascend to such prominence? The Irish had advantages that other Catholic immigrants lacked—they spoke English, they were accustomed to financially supporting the church, and they had already experienced anti-Catholic prejudice and knew how to use their political power to fight it. For all these reasons, wrote Lawrence McCaffrey, "the Irish were the only European ethnics who could have led the American Catholic community into an accommodation with the dominant, Anglo-American Protestant ethos."[7]

Politically, Spellman had always stood firm against communist aggression, while the Vatican, led after 1958 by Pope John XXIII, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, had begun to move away from the hard anticommunism of Pope Pius XII. Born in 1881 to sharecroppers outside Bergamo, northeast of Milan, Roncalli was the third of thirteen children. At the age of twelve he entered the Bergamo seminary, then continued his studies in Rome. After being called to service in the Italian army, he returned to the seminary to complete a doctorate in theology and was ordained in 1904. After serving as a chaplain in World War I, he remained in Rome until he was sent to Bulgaria, then Greece as an apostolic delegate—a Vatican representative with no diplomatic status—to assess conditions, and finally to Istanbul to locate prisoners of war. As if to make up for his years assigned to obscure posts, he was appointed nuncio, the Vatican's equivalent of an ambassador, to Paris to assist in the church's efforts in France as World War II drew to a close. In 1953 he became cardinal-patriarch of Venice, where he expected to spend his last years shepherding his flock. Five years later, Pope Pius XII, after a long illness, died on October 9, 1958, and nineteen days later the College of Cardinals elected Roncalli as the next pope. Already seventy-six years old and in poor health, Roncalli was expected to be a transitional pope, and sharing that assumption, he took the name John XXIII. He selected the name of John in honor of one of the twelve apostles—but also because it was the name of a long line of popes whose pontificates had been short. Dropping his predecessor's hard line against communism, John was regarded as a reconciler. With this new openness, the Vatican agreed to participate in the 1958 Brussels Universal and International Exhibition. The first world's fair since 1939, Expo 58, as it was called, was an opportunity for Europe to showcase its technological, industrial, and cultural progress after the devastation of World War II. The theme of the fair was simply "Man," but more broadly translated, "a world for a better life for mankind," and each participating nation presented its own interpretation of mankind's journey toward happiness and fulfillment.[8]

Coming at the height of the Cold War, the Brussels World's Fair proved to be one of "the most important propaganda event[s] to be staged by European allies in the Eisenhower years."[9] Fresh off the USSR's successful foray into outer space, the Soviet exhibition was expected to make the "biggest splash," by spending $50 million, or four times more than Congress allocated for the US exhibition.[10] The Soviet pavilion showcased the USSR's advances in space exploration with a model of the first earth-orbiting satellite, *Sputnik I*, along with a display of heavy machinery and electronic technology. Reporting on the fair, American artist Howard Fussiner described it as "heavy handed . . . but not ineffective."[11] According to one critic, the Soviets "announced that they would fire point-blank in Brussels with some of their most powerful cultural batteries."[12] Though the Soviet artwork displayed was decades behind contemporary trends, Fussiner could not help but notice that "such paintings require no explanation from art critics—the meaning is at the grasp of all and it was interesting to observe the pleasure of the average visitor." By contrast, he had noticed "the embarrassed snickers or unabashed guffaws which the American abstract expressionist paintings evoked from these same peasants and workers."[13]

Since this was not a trade fair, the United States pavilion lacked any commercial or industrial displays but rather focused on the broad sweep of American life at work and play. This was a mistake. One of the main attractions was the *Circarama*, a twelve-minute Walt Disney film that was more spectacular for its delivery—it was shown on a circular panoramic screen—than for its content. At a different time and place perhaps, the "soft sell," as *Time* magazine described it, would have been entirely appropriate, but compared to the Soviets' top-gun display, the pavilion was criticized as "bewildering" and proved to be an embarrassment to the Eisenhower administration.[14]

By contrast, as Fussiner wrote in his review of the fair, "the pavilion of the Holy See had one of the very best art exhibitions of the Fair—a selection of Christian Art from its beginnings to the present, with many exquisite treasures of early medieval times."[15] *Time* magazine wrote that "Vatican City has produced one of the best shows of all."[16] While some pavilions promoted culture as their weapon in the battle against communism, the Vatican put forward the life of Jesus Christ and the message of the church. The official name of the pavilion was "Civitas Dei"—the City of God. In a report issued by Providence bishop Russell J. McVinney, assigned to sway the American bishops on participation of US Catholics in the pavilion, he emphasized that the goal was to counter the influence of the secularist world, namely the Soviet Union and its satellites, by presenting the Catholic way of life in a dignified and effective manner, since "we are now engaged in a world war for the minds of men."[17]

A team of architects led by M. Paul Rome designed the pavilion as an allegorical city surrounded by a fifty-foot-high wall with large entryways. Within the walls stood a church, described by reporters as built in the "Swedish style," which was to say, of modern design. The church interior, which seated twenty-five hundred, was outfitted by Germany and France under the direction of the architect of the Cologne Cathedral. France also furnished the small chapel located behind the church, where the Blessed Sacrament (the consecrated host) was reserved for distribution at the Mass. Five additional chapels represented the six other sacraments: baptism, confirmation, ordination, marriage, reconciliation (confession), and anointing of the sick. Luxembourg was responsible for the sacristy, the church room in which the sacred vessels and vestments are stored.[18]

The theme of the entry hall was drawn from the Old Testament, with a focus on the creation of man and the prophecies. The second hall represented the New Testament—the Christian era, featuring the life of Christ and sections devoted to the Virgin Mary and the Holy Land. The highlight of the pavilion was a reproduction of catacombs and an exhibit of a hundred sacred images, titled "Imago Christi," ranging from the fourth century AD to the present.[19]

The largest work of art in the exhibit was created by the Bratislava-born British artist Arthur Fleischmann. During his lifetime, Fleischmann received commissions from around the world, including a number of religious works. Influenced by his Catholic faith, he would eventually sculpt images of four popes.[20] The Brussels' commissioner general of the Vatican pavilion selected Fleischmann for his twenty-foot aluminum sculpture *Risen Christ*, which depicted the Resurrection. Instead of a traditional rendering of Christ, it was a more stylized, angular work, criticized at the time for being too "Germanic," yet it has proven aesthetically enduring. Working in an acrylic medium, Fleischmann also completed a two-part frieze titled *Resurrection of the People*, to illustrate man on the last day.[21]

Upper-floor displays illustrated the papacy, the Vatican, the work of the missions, Catholic charitable works, and the church's presence in contemporary society through education, social action, the arts, science, and the Vatican-sponsored press, radio, and television agencies. Traditional cast bells rang from a fifty-foot-high carillon tower, along with miniature bells operated electronically to ring out the hours and play music. As an amenity to visitors, the pavilion included a garden, which led to a glass-enclosed restaurant that seated over one thousand, with a relaxing patio terrace.[22] The pavilion represented the Church Universal, but it was dependent on American Catholics to foot a significant portion of the cost. To participate in the upcoming New York fair, the Vatican would once again have to depend on substantial donations from Americans to fund its participation.

In 1961 Pope John XXIII issued the encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (Mother and teacher), a compendium of Catholic social and economic teaching on the heels of tensions between the Italian Right and Left, and moved the church away from political involvement. Later that same year, John issued *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on earth), calling on an end to the arms race. The pope realized that his peace overtures could be misunderstood and that he risked being used by the Kremlin, but he continued to pursue a neutral path.[23] This had an impact on how the church would respond to the fight against communism in Southeast Asia.

With the American involvement in Vietnam gaining momentum, there was a growing dissonance between the pre– and the post–World War II generations, regarding not only the war but also long-held traditions and values. The 1960s witnessed the convergence of several combustible movements—the long overdue push for civil rights, the burgeoning women's movement, a shift in sexual mores, just to name a few—all leading to a cultural and political explosion. The social capital that Robert Moses and Francis Spellman had banked on for so long began to shift. The world in which both men operated was changing and changing fast. But before the crises that would soon erupt across the country, there was to be one spectacular collaboration between New York's two most powerful men. Moses leaned on Spellman to join forces with him, first in enlisting the Vatican to participate in New York's World's Fair, and then ensuring the fair's blockbuster attraction by transporting Michelangelo's *Pietà* across the Atlantic Ocean to Flushing, a neighborhood in the Queens borough of New York City where the fair would be held.

Initially, the press welcomed Moses's leadership in bringing another fair to the city. In an editorial, New York's *Herald Tribune* extolled "The Bob Moses World's Fair," adding "We can't imagine anybody who could do the job better," and labeled the coming fair as Moses's "crowning achievement in a lifetime of public service."[24] But by the time the fair started, a shift in leadership at the *New York Times* signaled that enthusiasm for Moses had began to fade. Newspapers had helped sell the 1939 fair, but twenty-five years later, their support was tempered.

Other actors were to weave their way in and out of this story. On the art scene there was John Canaday, the leading art critic for the *Times*, who not long after he arrived at the paper dismissed abstract expressionists, artists such as Jackson Pollock, whom he did not name by name but described as living in a "protracted adolescence." These artists, along with their followers, in Canaday's opinion, held an exceptional tolerance for “incompetence and deception.”[25] Cultural battle lines were drawn, and with each new review—and there were many over Canaday’s seventeen-year tenure—one never knew on which side he would come down. Another satellite player was the powerful monsignor from Cicero, Illinois, Paul Marcinkus, nicknamed “Il Gorilla” for his imposing muscle, which he sometimes had to exert as a papal bodyguard. The term “bodyguard,” however, was inadequate to describe the roles that he held and the influence he wielded. He thought he could manage Moses, but he was wrong.

The story that unfolds in the following pages will never, nor could ever, be repeated again. It was a slice of New York history playing out from the Flushing fairgrounds to as far away as Rome. This story centers on only one pavilion, one out of one hundred and forty. It was not the largest pavilion, nor the most dazzling, but it spoke most clearly to the human spirit. It hosted the blockbuster that Moses needed to ensure the fair was a success and provide funds to complete his lifelong objective of turning a Queens dumping ground into a jewel of a park.