

PEOPLE

## Rochester writer's wonder of world expos led him to be an 'exhibit' in Dubai

Rochester writer Charles Pappas knows a lot about World's Fairs and World Expos. You might say that he has been obsessed with the topic, since attending the 1965 World's Fair in New York as a wide-eyed 9-year-old. Pappas is a senior writer for "Exhibitor Magazine," based in downtown Rochester. The magazine covers the trade show industry and corporate event marketing. That extends to world expos, like the one that began in Dubai on Oct. 1. After writing a book on the topic in 2018, he is probably the world's expert on the history of world's fairs and expos.

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Charles Pappas is a senior writer with Exhibitor Magazine. Pappas is photographed Tuesday, Oct. 12, 2021, in Rochester. Joe Ahlquist / Post Bulletin

**Charles Pappas is big in Dubai, even though he has never been there.**

Pappas, a Rochester writer, was recently surprised to learn that he is listed as a top "exhibit" in the 2020 World Expo in Dubai.

While he wasn't aware of his ranking in the international event's brochure, Pappas certainly was not surprised to be linked to the latest international exposition that dates its origins back to 1851.

Pappas is a senior writer for "Exhibitor Magazine," based in downtown Rochester. The magazine covers the trade show industry and corporate event marketing. That extends to world expos, like the one that began Oct. 1 in Dubai.

Expos are a professional and personal interest to Pappas. In recent years, that interest evolved into a passion.

After writing a book on the topic in 2018 called "Flying Cars, Zombie Dogs & Robot Overlords," he is probably the world's expert on the history of world's fairs and expos.

That's why the 2020 Expo organizer reached out to him as a consultant as a writer and speaker. And that led to his fame in Dubai.

Pappas chatted recently about his interests and experiences.



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**So the 2020 World Expo in Dubai recently sent out a list of their top 50 “must-see” attractions and listed you as one of them. Tell me about how that happened.**

“ I had no idea they were doing this... Among my other planning, for when I go to Dubai in a few days, I thought this (brochure) will be good sense of where to start. And I'm looking at number one and making a couple of notes. I turn the page over. I'm number 12. There's a moment of Twilight Zone unreality, when you think of this this has to be a joke.

It just utterly floored me. I'm a human attraction. I mean, it was delightful. But no one gave me even the slightest heads up. This was a complete shock.

**You've been helping the 2020 World Expo planners prepare the event. Tell me what that entailed.**

“Over the years, I've become more and more ensconced in the world of world fairs and expos. And of course, I wrote a book on it two years ago. And then in 2018, I addressed the State Department on the topic.

And that kind of snowballed into the people at Expo 2020 in Dubai hearing about me.

So several months ago, I began with a presentation to them on the history of the world expos why they're effective, why they're so powerful. And then that segued this year to be an official consultant to the ‘visitor experience area.’ So that's entailed a lot of writing and even podcasts.

So much of what I done was in some ways, being invisible, I just won't have my name on it, but it will be all around the expo in terms of explanatory signage, historical exhibits, and even up to up to as many as 10 of the audio tours led by me.

I'm also giving a presentation here in the US pavilion. They may also just plug me into doing some kind of storytelling as well about all the great stories behind the world expos since 1851.”

**I know you're very well traveled, but you haven't been to Dubai before.**

“No. I've been to Egypt and I've been a couple times to Jordan, because I really love the country of Jordan. And I go there to hike in the lost city of Petra. About eight years ago,

I replicated Lawrence of Arabia's journey across the Wadi Rum desert up to the Saudi Arabia border. That was that was the funnest thing I will never do again.

So this now gives me a good excuse to go there (Dubai).”

**You've described yourself as becoming ‘ensconced’ in the history of world expos. How did that start?**

“When I was 9, my dad drove us from Wisconsin to New York for the 1964-65 World’s Fair. That wonder of what I saw when I was 9 has never left me. It’s as fresh as if it was yesterday.

There were so many astonishing exhibits, but the one of them that really implanted itself in my head was the IBM exhibit. You walk under this grove of 30- to 45-foot-tall ‘trees’ made of steel around a monster version of the IBM Selectric typing element with the word IBM embossed in three dimensions 3,000 times on it. It opened up like a giant mouth to allow 500 people go in at a time. It lifted you up as much as nine stories in the air, where 14 projectors showed separate stories about computers about how easy they are and how logical.

America in the '60s had a recession that some called the ‘Automation Recession.’ IBM was still kind of fighting against the feeling that computers and automation would take our jobs.

IBM wasn't going to sell you a computer back in the day. But IBM wants you to understand they are computers. When you leave that exhibit, IBM is to computers what Google is to searches. You cannot separate them.

I remember the sense of wonder about the future. And that stuck in my mind, among many, many other exhibits... for half a century.

So fast forward to the year 2010. And we decided that Exhibitor will start covering the world expos, because they're the highest degree of ingenuity. We start off in Shanghai and then in 2012 we to go to South Korea and then Milan in 2015, then Kazakhstan in 2017, so it has snowballed nicely, but it's like a pinball. You know, had I not done this and then bounced to Rochester, Minnesota and then to Exhibitor, it would never have happened.”

### **How long have you been at Exhibitor?**

“It will be 20 years in 2022. And it's funny because many people know us in London and in Las Vegas, but you rarely hear of us here.

In Shanghai and in Milan, people knew who our (Exhibitor) guys are, but if we walk across the street here to Cafe Steam, nobody knows who we are. It's a really strange dichotomy. Mayo and IBM overshadow all here. So it's understandable, but really ironic at times.”

### **What will you do for Exhibitor in Dubai?**

“We pride ourselves on hitting every single pavilion there is at every single expo. And usually there's as many as 200. We analyze and we write about each one. So it ends up being an enormous amount of work. But it's exhausting. But it's exhilarating at the same time.

You've got the Eiffel Tower, probably the next great example of a signature construction for a World Expo. Obviously, it stood the test of time Here's the funny thing people don't know: the Eiffel Tower was only supposed to last for 20 years. It was to be deconstructed in 1909. It was hated at first, but became so loved later on. Now it is considered the most valuable monument brand in the world.”

### **In the U.S., these events were usually called world's fairs, but now they are called world expos. Can you tell me about that change?**

“That is a great question that no one has ever asked...There was a deliberate change in 1967, for Expo 67 in Montreal. ... It changed because they didn't want it to have the odor of state fairs... of being just entertainment. It became a more serious undertaking to present technologies for the future, to present solutions to ongoing and possible future problems... to educate more than entertain.”

### **It seems many technologies have been spotlighted at these events over the years. Is technology at the core of these expos?**

“I wouldn't say it's the core as much as it is parallel to everything. Just about every technology you can think of actually had a start there in some ways -- the fax machine, the envelope-folding machine, the telephone, the phonograph, X-ray machines. But

then that went from products to visions of the future in general. You had television being presented as the wave of the future in 1939 in New York

We're now focusing on environmental and social problems and what we can do to solve those. And, in many cases, they'll be showing technology that can help it. For instance, the Italians, in 2010 in Shanghai, had a transparent concrete that could also clean the area of smog.

In 1964, in New York, you had the introduction of computer dating, though they didn't know it at the time. The Parker Pen company introduced the computer that could hook you up with pen pals around the world. That was the germ of computer dating at the time."

### **I hear a World Expo could be coming to Minnesota. Is that right?**

"Minneapolis is trying to get the expo for 2027. And I believe late this year, they learn if they have won it. Their theme will be on health, which I think is really cool. No Expo has done that before. It could be a huge boon to the state and the city of Minneapolis as well. It would let a lot of people try out new technologies in that field. And I would love them to focus on new things like wearables for increasing your vision and hearing or the exoskeletons that can help handicapped people do things that are almost superhuman. That I think is really fascinating."

*Asked & Answered is a weekly question-and-answer column featuring people of southeastern Minnesota. Is there somebody you'd like to see featured? Send suggestions to [news@postbulletin.com](mailto:news@postbulletin.com).*



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