

SHANGHAI WORLD EXPO SPECIAL REPORT

National pavilions With a Global Touch

SHANGHAI

At world's fair, the search for prestige translates into globalized products

By JULIE MAKINEN

SHANGHAI — Ever since the Shanghai Expo opened last spring, the U.S. pavilion has taken a drubbing in the American media. It has been called “a national humiliation” and “an epic failure of planning.” Many critics have assailed its architecture as boring, while others have complained that it fails to do enough to showcase American science and technology.

“The U.S. Pavilion offers no vision of the future,” complained Bob Jacobson on the Web site The Huffington Post. “Like so many of the busted malls at home that it so closely resembles, the U.S. Pavilion is fragmentary and momentary, not the beacon of hope the Expo hosts expected or that the American people deserve.”

Even the U.S. secretary of state, Hillary Rodham Clinton — who spearheaded a last-minute campaign to raise about \$60 million from corporate sponsors because no government financing was allowed — seemed more relieved than impressed when she toured the pavilion in May. “It’s fine,” she said.

But look beyond the U.S. pavilion, and there is plenty of American creativity, innovation and technical prowess in evidence at the Expo. Some of the most iconic, popular and impressive attractions at this modern world’s fair were conceived, designed, built and installed by U.S. companies, even if their names are not on the buildings.

Take Miguelín, a blinking, breathing, gesturing animatronic baby that is 6.5 meters, or 21 feet, high and has been wowing and perplexing visitors at the Spanish pavilion. It was built by Amalgamated Dynamics, a Southern California costume and special effects company known for its work on films like “Alien vs. Predator,” “Starship Troopers” and “Spider-Man.”

Or consider Saudi Arabia’s flying-saucer-shaped pavilion — one of the most popular, with waiting times reaching six hours

or more. Visitors have been impressed with its immersive film experience, which takes the audience on a tour of the Middle Eastern country. But to create that experience, the pavilion team called on Sky-Skan, a company with headquarters in New Hampshire and offices in Europe and Australia that is known for its work with planetariums.

Sky-Skan used 25 projectors and its proprietary DigitalSky software to make one of the largest seamless video images in the world — 1,600 square meters, or 17,000 square feet. By comparison, an Imax movie screen is about 354 square meters.

BRC Imagination Arts, based in Burbank, California, played a lead role in the U.S. pavilion. But it also created and produced the Information and Communication Pavilion, sponsored by China Mobile and China Telecom. As part of that, BRC designed and built a unique handheld touch-screen device that each guest — 1,900 an hour — can use while touring the pavilion.

In some areas of the exhibition, visitors can personalize their experiences by making selections using the touch screen. And as people see things that interest them, they can swipe the device over various “targets” to collect information. The multilingual, rapid-recharging device can take pictures, and when a guest returns it at the exit, everything collected and recorded is downloaded and transformed into a personal Web page. Each day, about 24,000 new Web pages are created.

“This is a next-generation item for our industry,” said Bob Rogers, the founder of BRC. “We have been looking for ways to greet you before you come in and stay in contact long after you’ve left. This has really caught the attention of theme parks and museums, because it’s a huge leap forward.”

Not far from the Information and Communication Pavilion stands the Shanghai Corporate Pavilion, known as the Dream Cube. Its principal designer was also an American, Edwin Schlossberg, whose New York firm, ESI Design, has worked on projects as varied as the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York Harbor, the Playa Vista community in Southern California and the giant Reuters sign in Times Square, New York.

The Dream Cube’s lighting design was created by Full Flood, a Los Angeles company, and its day and nighttime presentations are by Don Mischer Productions, known for its work on Super Bowl halftime shows, Olympic Games opening ceremonies and President Barack Obama’s inauguration ceremony.

The central narrative of the Dream Cube — which was financed by more than 30 state-owned companies in Shanghai — derives from a story by Zhuangzi, a Chinese philosopher in the fourth century B.C. In the text, Zhuangzi dreamed that he was a butterfly flitting around but he suddenly woke up and no longer knew whether he was Zhuangzi who had dreamed he was a butterfly or

Visitors to the pavilion, which focuses on Shanghai's past, present and future and invites public input on possible solutions to the city's challenges, might assume that the Zhuangzi inspiration had come from the Chinese members of the Dream Cube's creative team. It actually originated with Mr. Schlossberg, who recalled it from his "great books" curriculum as a student at Columbia University in New York.

"I remembered Zhuangzi from my college philosophy class. It related to this idea that there are many points of view to solving a problem," he said. "The butterfly also played into this idea of transformation, and the struggle of modern life."

Mr. Rogers, of BRC, noted that companies had long sponsored some of the most innovative pavilions at world's fairs. As far back as the 1930s, Henry Ford used one to propose large-scale soybean farming in the United States, and General Motors introduced a concept for a coast-to-coast U.S. highway system.

And the "globalization" of world's fair pavilions is hardly new — Mr. Rogers's company, for example, worked on the Canadian Pacific Pavilion at the 1986 Expo in Vancouver, British Columbia, and the Basque National Pavilion at the 1992 Expo in Seville, Spain.

But with the Shanghai Expo, the phenomenon of pavilions as globalized products seems to have reached new heights.

Mina Chow, a professor at the University of Southern California School of Architecture who is filming a documentary on the Shanghai Expo architecture called "Face of a Nation," said expos these days were less about showcasing exclusive products made in particular countries and more about prestige. "To

create the most memorable image or pavilion experience — if that means going to Canada for Imax, California for animatronics and film production — then so be it," Ms. Chow said. "The prestige of the party becomes paramount, and often, unsurprisingly, to the neglect of the country's values and culture."

Alec Gillis, co-founder and co-owner of Amalgamated Dynamics, said that working for Spain on the mammoth Miguelín — which cost about \$2 million and took about nine months — was a good creative and business opportunity, regardless of which country's pavilion it was in.

"I've always wanted to do a giant baby," Mr. Gillis said. "There's something to juxtaposing the cuteness of a baby and the imposing scale of a monument."

The idea for Miguelín came from the Spanish filmmaker Isabel Coixet, and Mr. Gillis was a bit apprehensive about how the public would receive the huge tot. "We didn't want it to be creepy," he said. But "when I saw Chinese people come around the corner, it was just looks of awe, big smiles."

"I think Isabel was correct in her analysis of the psychology of the Chinese and how they would respond," he said.

Mr. Gillis, who has seen computer-generated graphics substitute for some of the work his company used to do on movies, said the Expo was a great chance "to remind people in this virtual age that there's a value in real, tangible things." Already, his company has received inquiries from Chinese companies about building more babies. He is ready to go if the orders firm up.

"The gestation period would drop," Mr. Gillis said. "We have the molds. We can crank them out now."

