



# The New York World's Fairs: Interpreting A Landscape of Civil Disobedience

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## Introduction

New York City hosted two World's Fairs in 1939 and 1964, bringing international attention to Flushing Meadows Corona Park and the Borough of Queens. Today, New York City may recall that the Queens Museum and the monument known as the "Unisphere" are the best known remains of the 1939 and 1964 fairs, respectively. Today many residents including inhabitants of Queens, are oblivious to the historical significance of the World Fair site. Two digital products are currently under development to improve the interpretation of the park and show that one of the many roles of the fairs was to serve as a world stage for Civil Rights demonstrations.

## Study Objective/Aim/Contribution

This project offers two types of digital products—an exhibit and map—that can be created to facilitate public participation in the documentation and interpretation of the fairgrounds. The online exhibit will consider the impact of the proposed April 22, 1964 "stall-in" demonstration by the Brooklyn Chapter of the Congress On Racial Equality (CORE) to block roads, trains, and subways from reaching opening day of the World's Fair, expanding the use of the widely publicized and effective "sit-ins." The TimeMap will make it possible to pinpoint the locations of Civil Rights action that took at the N.Y. World's Fairs in 1939 and 1964. The digital map will make it possible to visualize how the landscape of Civil Rights protests and demonstrations constantly shifts in response to larger economic, political, social, and environmental change.

## Methods

To complete the project, preliminary research was completed to locate appropriate digital platforms to host the final products. TimeMapper is an open-source software that allows students to work asynchronously, visualizing data on an interactive map that doubles as a timeline. Data will be captured using Google spreadsheets that can be shared to multiple people.

The digital exhibit will be created using Omeka™, an open-source content management system to create and publish exhibits on the internet. Students will assist in creating one of the six components of the exhibit including writing the introduction, four narrative sections, the conclusion, and further learning. Students were provided with instruction on how to locate and analyze primary source materials online databases and digital collections of New York City based archives and museums.

## Results

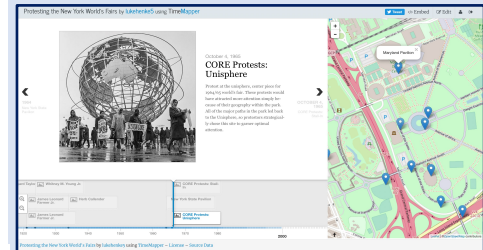


The COVID-19 pandemic forced academic and cultural institutions to reevaluate how they share their stories. Creating digital public history products, like the digital exhibit and TimeMap, will become increasingly important as museums and information organizations develop their online identity.

The digital exhibit will reveal the complexities of the Civil Rights Movement, as activists involved in the protests, both inside and outside of CORE, disagreed on the projected efficacy the "stall-in." The TimeMap will trace World's Fair protests throughout time and space, uncovering clues about the cultural landscape of Flushing Meadows-Corona Park. The data accrued for digital exhibit and TimeMap could be used to create interpretive historical panels or markers at the World's Fair site or a museum exhibit reflecting the diversity of approaches used to express civil disobedience in the 1960s.

## Conclusion

Research tools used in the Digital Humanities projects using TimeMap and Omeka™ exhibit have potential to involve the public—including the those directly involved in the World's Fairs protests and their descendants and friends to become directly involved in documenting and interpreting the Civil Rights demonstrations at the N.Y. World's Fairs. The project provides students an opportunity to become more adept at utilizing primary sources such as newspapers, reports, postcards, guidebooks, and other sources of historical research. The pandemic has ushered in a greater dependence on digital content, rendering such kinds of digital products ever more critical to pursuits in Public History.



## About the Authors

Luke Henke, a graduate from Georgia Southern University, is from Warner Robins, Georgia and Ryan McDonnell, who received his undergraduate degree from Temple University, is from Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Both are graduate students enrolled in the dual-degree MA Public History and MS Library & Information Science program. Luke and Ryan have also worked as graduate assistants in the History and Library and Information Science departments since 2019 and 2020, respectively.