

How the Original Futurama Transmuted America

The groundbreaking fair ride that literally reshaped a nation (and inspired both Disney and Groening)



POP CULTURAL PRECURSORS

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On April 30, 1939, the New York World's Fair opened in Queens, New York's Flushing Meadows Park. It was enormous, and the vision of the future on display there was bold, fanciful, exciting and incredibly optimistic.

Some of the biggest companies in the world poured money into elaborate pavilions that they hoped would demonstrate how breakthroughs in science and technology were going to reshape their products... and the world.

How the Original Futurama TRANSMUTED AMERICA



The most memorable exhibit was the General Motors Pavilion, and the most memorable feature in the General Motors Pavilion was a ride called the Futurama. People stood in line for hours to ride it and experience the exciting possibilities of life in the distant future — the year 1960.

The Futurama ride carried fair visitors past tiny, realistic landscapes while a narrator described the world of tomorrow. The effect was like catching a glimpse of the future from the window of an airplane. As you might expect from a ride sponsored by GM, the focus was on what roadways and transportation might look like in 20 years.

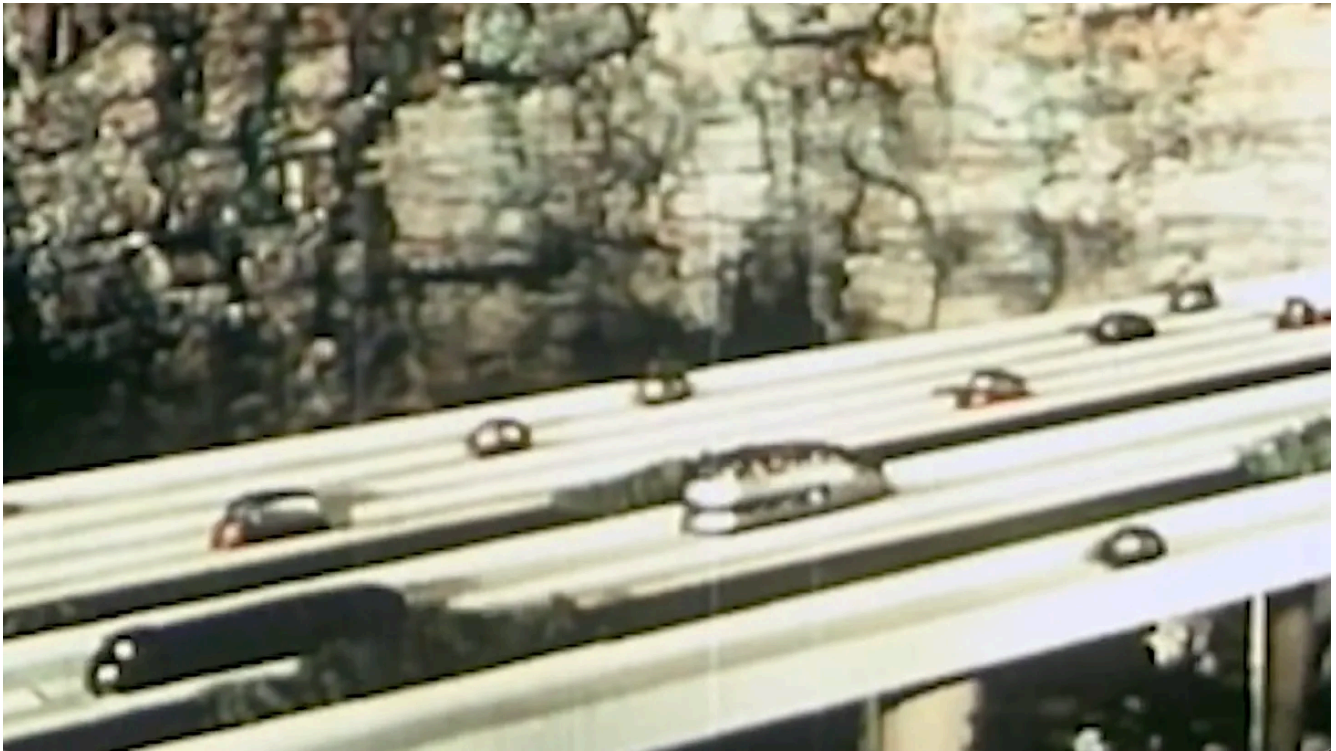
Clips of the Futurama Ride at the New York World's Fair (From "To New ...



Watch excerpts from To New Horizons, a documentary that gives a glimpse of the miniature futurist landscapes featured in the Futurama ride at the 1939-1940 World's Fair.

(Courtesy Prelinger Archives) *You can see a much longer 15-minute excerpt showing off more of the original Futurama ride [here](#). “Detailed miniatures are always compelling,” says Dan Howland, editor of the [Journal of Ride Theory](#). “It doesn’t matter whether they are dollhouses or model trains or it’s Legoland, something about them just sucks you in.”*

*“The 1939 Futurama had two other factors that compounded the fascination: first, a promise of personal car ownership (and after the Great Depression that sounded pretty good), and second, a grand vision of the future,” he adds. “Up until the Futurama, manufacturers had exhibited at fairs to show how they made their products. Then the Futurama came along and said, *Here is how the future will feel.*”*



“The 1939 audience wasn’t used to having a company selling optimism,” says Howland, “and it made their hearts sing.”

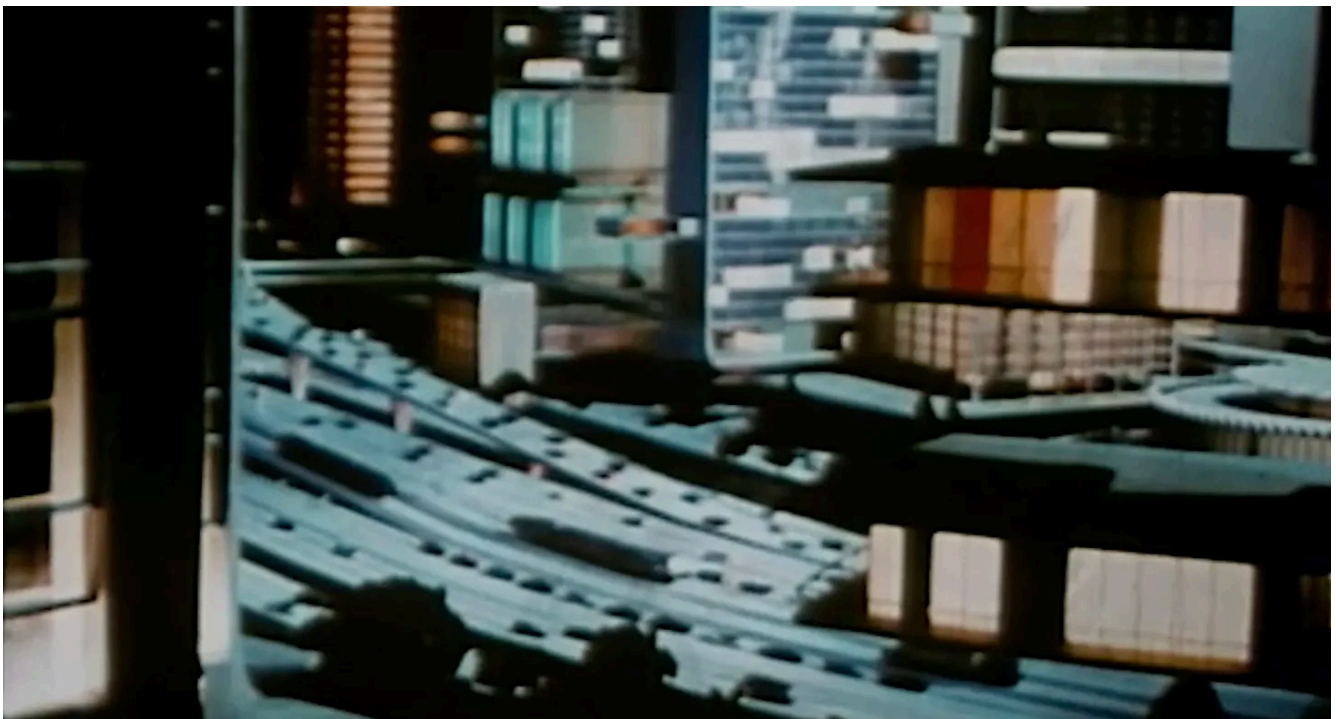
GM’s ride presented a utopia forged by urban planning. Sophisticated highways ran through rural farmland and eventually moved into carefully ordered futuristic cities. “You have to understand that the audience had never even considered a future like this,” says Howland. “There wasn’t an interstate freeway system in 1939. Not many people owned a car. They staggered out of the fair like a cargo cult and built an imperfect version of this incredible vision.”

The Futurama wasn’t so much about the cars GM intended to build. Visitors were told about certain features these future cars might have — such as radio controls that help them maintain proper distance from each other — but the vehicles themselves were so tiny that they could barely be distinguished.



What the Futurama ride was really selling was a highway system — a taxpayer-funded highway system. “I think the best take on it was in E. L. Doctorow’s novel *World’s Fair*,” says Howland. “A family exits the ride, and the father says, ‘General Motors is telling us what they expect from us: We must build them the highways so they can sell us the cars.’”

The original Futurama left an indelible imprint on popular culture, visible in everything from the art design in sci-fi films to forward-looking marketing campaigns to the widespread use of the suffix [-arama](#).



It’s no wonder that when New York hosted another World’s Fair in 1964, a second Futurama exhibit was mounted. The original Futurama had presented the brave new world of 1960. Many of the predictions had already been disproven by the time Futurama II debuted.

“This is always a recurring problem — the times catch up with science fiction visions,” says Howland. “That’s why Steampunk is so popular, because it can’t become obsolete. But the Futurama, man, that was *Dieselpunk*!”

A Glimpse of Futurama II at the 1964-1965 World's Fair



An excerpt from the documentary To the Fair! An American couple meet a couple from India at the 1964-1965 World's Fair, and they all decide to go for a ride on Futurama II. After their worlds are rocked by a vision of life in the years to come, they luxuriate with a post-ride cigarette. (Courtesy Prelinger Archives)

Futurama II looked even further into the future, presenting predictions of a time that most fair visitors won't live to see. In this world, mankind had dominion over the entire universe. Six-wheeled moon buggies moved easily over the lunar surface, ritzy hotels had been built deep beneath the ocean, tree-devouring machinery carved highways through jungles.

The point of view wasn't quite as distanced as the original Futurama. The far-fetched vehicles were much larger, and they were piloted by tiny human puppets. The overall look was strikingly similar to the campy TV show *Thunderbirds*, which premiered as the 1964-1965 World's Fair was closing.

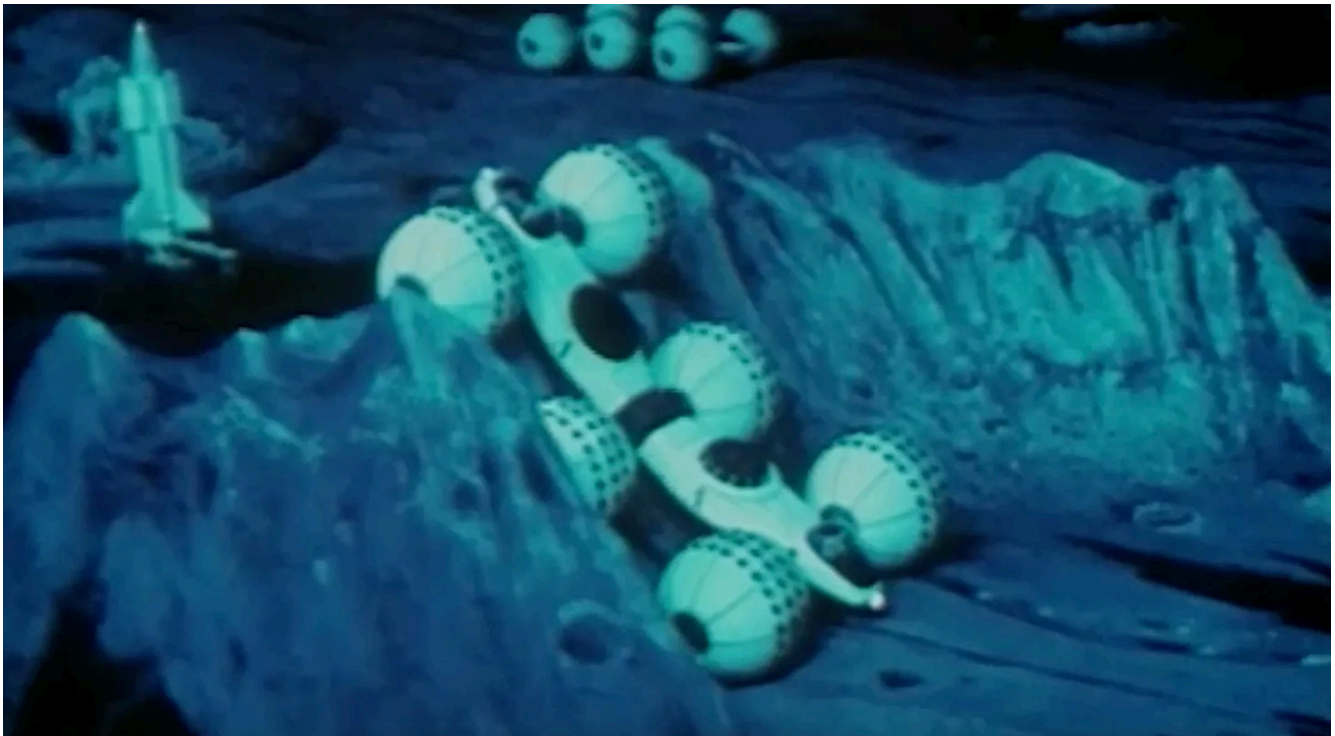


At the end of the original Futurama exhibit, fair visitors were given a pin. At the end of the second, it was a pocket tab, but the simple message was the same: I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE.

It's easy to laugh at the datedness and the overoptimism of these attractions. But we should resist the urge to dismiss them.

"These things aren't just quaint," says author/activist/journalist [Cory Doctorow](#). "They're a caution and an inspiration. They show us just how faulty our intuition about the future use of new inventions can be. Most of this stuff was utterly plausible when the rides opened, and it's only in hindsight that we can see how weirdly wrong they got it."

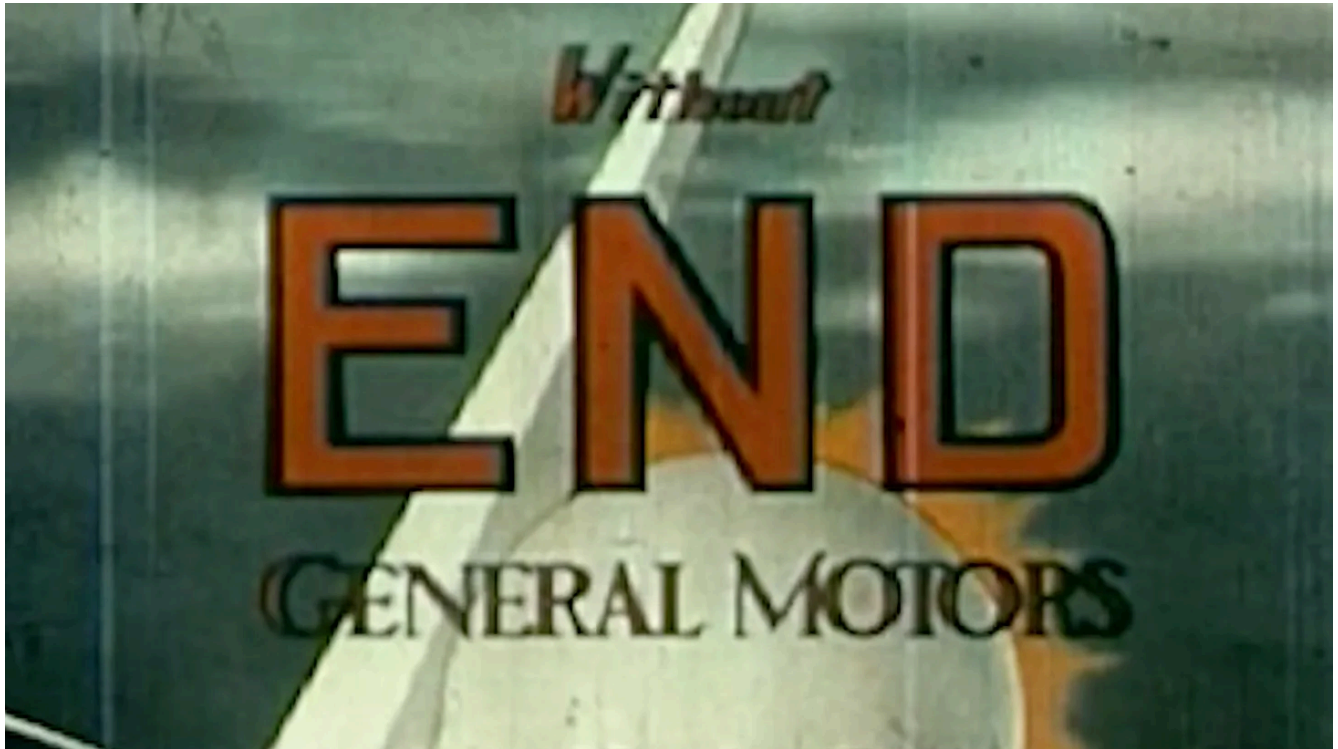
“It’s an inspiration too, though,” Doctorow adds. “They show us that we’re pretty good at figuring out what’s going to be important to the future, but not why. Space is important — for weather satellites, Google Earth, spying, GPS. But not colonizing — at least not so far.”



Howland points out that we might be better off if we’d followed the designs of the original Futurama to the letter. “The designer, Norman Bel Geddes, did a lot of research on how to build technological solutions to traffic problems,” says Howland.

“And he did it decades before the problems even manifested themselves. Unfortunately, nobody paid any attention to the problems Geddes anticipated, so we ended up with all these fantastic freeways and they’re all gridlocked by 5 p.m. every weeknight. If we lived in the Futurama, we’d be home by now.”

The gee-whiz corporate-sponsored futurist edutainment aspect of GM’s Futurama rides can be seen an inspiration for Disney’s EPCOT, and GM was a launch partner in that project, working with Imagineers on an attraction called [World of Motion](#), which used humorous animatronics rather than miniature cityscapes to tell an optimistic story about the past and future of vehicular transportation. World in Motion was discontinued in 1996.



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