1939 dream city’s glimpse of the future was clouded by reality

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Covering 1,216 acres of the Flushing Meadows-Corona Park section of Queens — a former garbage dump — the New York World's Fair of 1939 presented a glorious vision of "The World of Tomorrow."

In the Westinghouse Building — an inverted cone of expanding circles surrounding a tower that resembled Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory — Electro, the Moto-Man, a 7-foot robot, talked, counted, smoked cigarettes and walked backward. In the Communications Zone, RCA featured a contraption called a television. And at DuPont's Wonder World of Chemistry, the Tatterman Marionettes taught audiences how to use nylon.

But there were storm clouds on the horizon — and they would do more than disrupt the opening-day festivities. "Anyone who thinks about the future," Albert Einstein warned, with an eye on Europe, "must live in fear and terror." Because "people living in different countries kill each other at irregular time intervals."

James Mauro, a former editor of Spy magazine, sets the fair in the context of the onset of World War II. In a narrative filled with gadgets, magic and colorful characters, he uncovers and unpacks a time capsule containing the detritus of a world intent on wrapping its troubles in dreams and dreaming its troubles away.

With its sensationalistic sub-title, "Twilight" is a bit of a bait and switch. The "genius," Albert Einstein, played only a peripheral role at the fair. The "murder" — a bomb at the British Pavilion that killed two New York City policemen — occupies only 20 pages of the book. And "madness," the alliterative partner of "murder," exists mostly as a manifestation of Maurovian melodrama.

Mauro is at his best explaining the strenuous — and increasingly desperate — efforts of Grover Whalen, the fair's president, and Harvey Gibson, his successor, to make it a financial success. Whalen couldn't get elected officials in Europe to appropriate money for exhibits until he persuaded Joseph Stalin and Benito Mussolini to build large pavilions. In short order, 62 nations signed on, the largest number any exposition had ever known. Mauro notes the irony: "democracy" depended, in no small measure, on dictators.

Nonetheless, although about 45 million folks (7 million of them out-of-towners) attended the fair, it closed with a deficit of $19 million. Perhaps, Mauro speculates, citizens of Dubuque couldn't overcome their animus for New York City. Perhaps it didn't have enough spectacle and sensation. And perhaps, with the Great Depression not yet over, the price of admission — and concessions — was too high.

When the fair closed in 1940, the world was in flames. And, Mauro concludes, when the exhibits were dismantled, much of the wreckage was "re-purposed" for war. The 4,000 tons of steel in the Trylon and Perisphere was used to construct ships, shell casings and gun forgings. The Greyhound buses that had shuttled passengers across the fairgrounds carried army recruits from their home towns to boot camps.

And it would be H.V. Kaltenborn, the narrator of "Democracy," who would, as the broadcaster on CBS radio, inform Americans that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

As his last word, Mauro invokes the assessment of Whalen, who continued as New York City's "official greeter" throughout the 1950s. "Didn't they realize," Whalen asked, "that we created a 1,216-acre dream city where there had just been a dump before?" Well, maybe "they" did. And maybe they realized as well that dreams don't always come true.

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Twilight at the world of tomorrow
Genius, Madness, and Murder, and the 1939 World's Fair on The Brink of War
By James Mauro
Ballantine Books, $28

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