

# A FAIR TO REMEMBER

By Julie Catalano

Photography courtesy of [www.hemisfair.org](http://www.hemisfair.org)

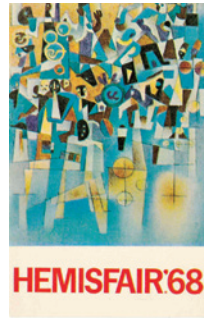
With a theme of “Confluence of Civilizations in the Americas,” the official World’s Fair known as HemisFair ran from April 6 to October 6, 1968 in downtown San Antonio, welcoming six million visitors who strolled among dozens of international pavilions and exhibits from science and industry, enjoyed live performances, boarded the futuristic monorail, and rode a glass elevator to the deck of the 750-foot Tower of the Americas to see the entire spectacle from above. It was a \$156 million project that began in 1965 when the Bureau International de Expositions (BIE) bestowed official fair status on the Alamo City. Politicians, celebrities and moguls organized, strategized and mobilized to make the fair a reality.

“If you think about a world’s fair, it’s about people coming from all over to a place where they can show off their country,” says Drew Hicks, communications manager for HemisFair, the ongoing urban redevelopment project by HemisFair Park Area Redevelopment Corporation (HPARC) on roughly 40 acres of the original 96.2 acre fairground. “We sat down in early 2017 and started thinking about what we really wanted to do for the 50th.”

The result is “Viva HemisFair! A 50th Anniversary Celebration” that begins on April 6, 2018 — 50 years to the day of the fair’s opening. This time around it will be “all about the diverse people who make San Antonio special,” says Hicks. “The indigenous people who have been here since time immemorial, multigenerational families, all the way to recent arrivals.”

The free three-day celebration in the HemisFair district will have cultural zones for Americana, Mexico, Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, featuring local and area residents with a connection to those heritage traditions. Live music, pop up performances, cultural and artistic demonstrations, food, drink and interactive activities promise a colorful and informative weekend. Five historic homes will be mini museum exhibits, including one commemorating the downtown residential neighborhood uprooted and displaced by HemisFair, and one focusing on national and world events during the late 1960s, inarguably one of the most troubled and turbulent times in American history.

“We want it to be retro and fun,” says Hicks, “but we also want it to be an event from 2018 where people can have a deep, authentic experience.” To prepare, the team pulled the UTSA



*For those who were there, HemisFair ‘68 will always evoke vivid shared memories of San Antonio’s seminal moment on the world stage. For those who weren’t, the 50th anniversary celebration this April might be the next best thing.*

special archives collection and “started digging through stuff and began to put ideas to paper. It was an amazing process.”

Christopher Medina knows all about digging for HemisFair stuff. The Wisconsin native didn’t even exist in 1968 (“I missed it by 10 years and a half dozen states”) but when his family moved to San Antonio in the 1980s, the history buff was inexplicably drawn to the “local” World’s Fair that so many remembered so fondly. His interest turned into a passion for all things HemisFair, and on April 6, 2011, he launched [www.worldsfair68.info](http://www.worldsfair68.info), a collection of images and reminiscences from those who were there. “I’m fascinated by how much the city changed from one event,” he says, “everything from changing the emphasis of buildings from street view to river view, the rise of tourism, even the hotels that were built.”

Unquestionably, the most famous hotel to come out of the fair was the Hilton Palacio del Rio, known for its legendary marvel of modular engineering that gave San Antonians the unforgettable sight of individual hotel rooms lifted by crane and carefully placed on a tower across from the fairgrounds. Designed by Cerna & Garza Architects and built by construction mogul H.B. “Pat” Zachry, “the hotel had to be open by the World’s Fair,” says

Robert Thrailkill, general manager of Hilton Palacio del Rio. By building the nearly 500 rooms off site — “fully furnished minus the TV, all that was left was to hook up the water” — they made the deadline. ♦

**For more info on Viva HemisFair! April 6-8, 2018:**  
[www.hemisfair.org](http://www.hemisfair.org), 210.709.4750.

## IT WAS 50 YEARS AGO TODAY

HemisFair ‘68 isn’t the only one hitting the big 5-0. The UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures (ITC) — one of the original fair structures — has a three-day schedule of activities beginning Friday, April 6: an opening ceremony, 50th anniversary retrospective exhibit of HemisFair ‘68, the premiere of their new “dome show,” and over the weekend the Back 40 outdoor education will feature living historians, exhibit interpreters and performances.

**For the ITC calendar and more info:**  
[www.texancultures.com/itc50](http://www.texancultures.com/itc50), 210-458-2300.



**PREFABRICATED ROOM STACKED 1967**  
**COURTESY HILTON PALACIO DEL RIO**