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On Place

It's a Mall World After All

Disney, Design, and the American Dream, by **Tom Vanderbilt**

I BEGIN WITH A CONFESSION: the first city I ever visited, outside of that big-shouldered metropolis close to my suburban Chicago home, was Walt Disney World.

At least, the Florida theme park *seemed* like a city. Thronged with people, the monorail whisking overhead, the place had not only multistory "modernist" hotels but also a "historic" Main Street that, while not authentic, resonated with more age and mystery than did the equally contrived mansard-roofed discount stores and chock-a-block strip malls that crowded the entrances to the fancifully named subdivisions that comprised my suburb. The year was 1974, long before New Urbanism was even dreamed of, long before Celebration, Florida ,was planned, even before EPCOT, Disney's "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow," was constructed. Beyond the Magic Kingdom, America was still learning from Las Vegas, muddling between yesterday and tomorrow, city and country, struggling in the uncertain times of defeat in Vietnam, the oil embargo, and recession. If Disney was dystopia, nobody told me it could be so much fun.

To my childhood imagination, Disney World was "almost all right," as the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* insisted of the suburban strip, even if I already knew I did not much care for either the "duck" or the "decorated shed" back home.[1] There was implied urbanism at Disney, a walkable scale whose only parallel in my youthful experience was a shopping mall; for a decentered age, it seemed to provide a center. There was also a strange mix of fantasy and safety; one could create a narrative, one could get lost, but lost safely, and then find one's way "home" to the comfort of the Polynesian Village Hotel for dinner. I knew it was not a real city—no more than the now-shuttered "Old Chicago" amusement park, which offered a turn-of-the-century version of its namesake, or than the recreated Main Street housed in Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, said to have inspired Walt Disney—but whatever it was, it was no more or less real than the other instruments of fantasy (comic books, science fiction movies, toy soldiers) I had at my disposal.

Over time I would learn to accept the received ideas of the school of Disney criticism, renouncing the site of my childhood fantasies as culturally bankrupt, homogeneous, soul-destroying—*it was a wonder I made it out alive*. Disney World has been subjected to the full range of critique available to modern social science, from the absurdist hyperbole of French intellectuals to the Middletown rigor of Duke University's "The Project on Disney." In retrospect, however, what is most striking about the Disney discourse is its intensity of feeling—as intense, albeit in an opposite cant, as my own

childhood fantasies. "It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Disneyland in the American imagination," writes Alexander Wilson in *The Culture of Nature*.[2] It would certainly be hard to overestimate its importance in my childhood imagination, and equally difficult to overstate Disneyland's importance in the imagination of American (and global) cultural critics. For nearly half a century, Disney's places, as much as its films, have been the specter haunting—and enchanting—America. As Greil Marcus notes, "[S]omething in the Disney parks, if not Disneyism as such, brings out not necessarily the best or the worst but so often the most in people—it strips them bare, reduces them to babble or prompts curses and slurs."[3] The antipaeans to Disney, in prose by turns fevered, suspicious, and downright apocalyptic, bring to mind the question asked by the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* in response to the heated, elegiac style of the critics of strip-mall suburbia: "If it is so bad, why is it so inspiring?"

All this suggests a fundamental, rarely articulated question. How did a theme park based upon a television show become not only the Ur-city of America, a model for countless neotraditional "cities," but also its opposite, Fritz Lang's dark *Metropolis* reworked with gaudy colors and Goofy smiles, the very symbol of what scars the contemporary American landscape? If "Mickey Mouse" once meant (according to Merriam-Webster) "lacking importance," "annoyingly petty," or "insipid or corny," then "Disneyfication" is now cultural shorthand for the dreaded substitution of urban reality with a sanitized and "Imagineered" spectacle—an opiate for the middle-class suburban masses. Some observers, however, have been more optimistic, positing Disney's parks as a latter-day City on the Hill. Speaking in 1963, James Rouse described Disneyland as "the greatest piece of urban design in the United States today" (even while acknowledging that it was an amusement park).[4] The critic Peter Blake, writing in 1975, suggested that a near-bankrupt New York City be turned over to the planners at Disney, who "have demonstrated to all the world how to build and operate a really exciting new town."[5]

Disney bridged the metaphorical leap between theme park and real town, of course, with Celebration, its pop.-1,500-and-growing New Urbanist-style development near Orlando, Florida, and here the same critiques and endorsements are being revisited. Celebration is either a "most impressive landscape of community" that leaves visitors "impressed by the extraordinary care Disney has taken in every aspect of its physical design";[6] or it is a "media monolith's vision of privatized governance and democracy overruled by technocracy," whose citizens are cloned from "Mouseketeer DNA."[7] Celebration might be a bit of both, but here too, as with the theme parks, the Disney imprimatur sends criticism spinning off its axes, into boosterish acceptance of the brand name or near-hysterical premonitions of *The Stepford Wives* come to life. Given these extremes, it is difficult to see Disney and its influence on American culture—specifically on the built environment—for what it is. A phrase like "the Disneyfication of New York" short-circuits a deeper investigation into the myriad and divergent factors behind urban revitalization. Meanwhile, Celebration, like Disney itself, is often criticized as the cause of something for which it is actually only a symptom. Before returning to these issues, I would like to reconsider the physical basis for all this presumed influence, positive and negative: the theme parks themselves.

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Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance is a recent exhibition organized by the Canadian Centre for Architecture and curated by Karal Ann Marling; a handsome catalogue of the exhibition has been published. The show's chief virtue is to shed much of the cultural baggage that Disney has acquired through the years and focus instead on the buildings, transportation systems, and physical design of Disney parks in the United States, as well as in France and Japan.

The creation myth of Disneyland is almost as well known as the park itself. Walt Disney, weary of the exigencies of the movie business and filled with idle dreams of recreating his boyhood home of Marceline, Missouri, uses a television program of the same name to finance Disneyland—not just another seedy amusement park but a standardized bastion of family-oriented fun and a pointed commentary on the urban life outside its gates. A decade later, in the late 1960s, dismayed by the sprawl that now surrounds his park in Anaheim, south of Los Angeles, Disney buys a minor fiefdom in Florida, where he will expand upon the earlier theme with a buffer zone against the inevitable urban development. Here Disney plans to build also his long-planned prototypical community, but this project will be realized only after his death, and only in a severely denuded form.

Although "Main Street" is just one attraction of many in the theme parks, it was closest to Disney's heart—it was based not on a Disney product but on Disney's personal history and memories. It is also the attraction that most embodies "the architecture of reassur-

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ance": all those architectural and environmental touches, ranging from harmonious color schemes to the absence of garbage (a Main Street "newspaper" was discontinued early on because the discarded copies were thought to clutter to the street) to the famous 5/8 building scale (which "made the street a toy," as Disney put it), which work together to offer an accessible landscape where Disney and visitors alike could feel instantly "at home." More Frank Capra than Frank Lloyd Wright, Disney's Main Street is a populist paradise designed to make vacationers feel comfortable, not awed by the achievements of would-be fountainheads. One early scheme was even discarded because Disney felt that, "the fellow was attempting a monument to himself rather than designing something that is for people."[8] Disneyland *was* Walt's monument to himself, of course, but even as such it was less an architectural than a sensory creation, gauzy and soft-focused rather than steel-and-glass sharp. Disney's Main Street was "disigned" (as the credit on a sketch notes) less as a place than as a film—animators played as large a role in Disneyland as did architects. This was perhaps a natural impulse in a place shaped by the physical needs and fantastical trappings of the film industry: Disneyland was, as Reyner Banham wrote, "the set for a film that was never going to be made except in the mind of the visitor."[9]

And the film was as easy on the eye as a Disney cartoon. "Main Street was aesthetically unthreatening," writes Marling, "different, in that respect, from strip malls and real streets where every store battled with its neighbor in a disquieting cacophony of visual stimuli."[10] As the historian John Francaviglia says, "Walt eliminated the contradictions."[11] Eliminating certain contradictions, however, only gave rise to others. Disney was so wedded to his Main Street memory that he first tried to populate the place with the kinds of retailers one finds in a small town, rather than with the trinket vendors and fast-food outlets typical of amusement parks. "Disneyland struggled to maintain a tenant list of shoe stores and other specialized apparel shops not because people came to the park to buy loafers and underwear but because the Main Street Walt remembered used to have them," Marling writes.[12] But apparently visitors' fantasies did not include buying goods available at home (and more and more in shopping malls, not on Main Street), so eventually the stores sold just Disney merchandise. Another contradiction was the widespread use of public transportation within the park and its utter abandonment outside. A photograph in the show and book captures this: an old-fashioned train with Mickey Mouse at the controls pulls up to a stop in Disneyland, while in the background acres and acres of parked cars are visible. The point was depressingly obvious: public transportation was now "fun," an attraction in a theme park, largely because in the prosperous country outside the park, as the building of the Interstate Highway System was about to begin, it was being effectively dismantled.

Still, Disney's theme parks achieved a level of coherence unknown to most urban planners (even as the parks exacted heavy infrastructural and congestion costs in the areas beyond their pristine precincts). Deyan Sudjic, noting the critical dismissal of Disney's efforts, writes that "you don't have to swallow Disney's world view to see that what he is doing is astonishing, the urban equivalent of NASA. Most ideal worlds stay on paper, Disney has built his."[13] Curiously, though, Disney never succeeded in building his most rational vision of dream urbanism: the various prototypes known first as "Progress City" and ultimately as EPCOT. Examined today, these seem as quaintly anachronistic as the Jetson-style futurism espoused in Disney's Tomorrowland (before it became self-consciously retro). But in the 1950s they had an authority and allure similar to that of Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City, the Norman Bel Geddes-designed Futurama, the ideas of Lewis Mumford, and even the legacy of Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities: a central business district marked by a lone skyscraper (one thinks of Mumford's claim that skyscrapers, rather than benefiting from cluster, would be better used "to accentuate the clean lonely qualities of a place"),[14] surrounded by a greenbelt, connected by radial routes to a series of satellite cities. Trains would shuttle commuters back and forth; cars would be used for interurban commuting and would be parked at the city's edge. If such urban visions look a bit bleak today, it might be because they have been realized in the viciously truncated version known as "Edge Cities," which are less beacons of progress than encomiums to the planning tradition Disney was, in his instinctive populism, trying to bring to the mainstream of popular culture (similar to his patronage of Salvador Dali, a surrealist Henry Luce could love). The ultimate irony is that by the time Disney actually got around to building a model town, it leapfrogged past '50s futurism and embraced a more radical, retrospective version of the future: a between-the-wars small town akin to Disney's Main Street itself.

One of the lasting impressions from *The Architecture of Reassurance* is of how little is actually needed to create a sense of place—a realization apparently lost upon a generation of suburban builders. The comforting buildings of Disney's Main Street disguise a '50s strip-mall shell, Marling points out, while a structure like the Contemporary Hotel—a prefabricated hotel similar to the roadside chains—seemed progressive simply because a monorail passed through its lobby. The ingenious use of color, light, trompe l'oeil, and a bit of imagination go much further than do the much-hyped "utilidors," monorails, and other grand infrastructural schemes in Disney's parks. As in cities, the larger monuments of the park (Disney called them "wienies") were located to orient and draw visitors—and most tourists, after all, behave much the same way in Dis-

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neyland as they do in cities: taking photos, buying things, seeking out attractions, orienting themselves by landmarks. Of course, in Walt's parks, no maps were needed; the architecture was its own narrative. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," Joan Didion once wrote,[15] and it comes as little surprise that the childhood stories lived out in real time and space in Disneyland should have endured in the adult minds of those who seek to recreate places whose true aspects were as dimly and fondly remembered as fairy tales.

Celebration's manufactured quality should not be belabored. Every community is invented at some point, and Celebration is simply a late-capitalist entertainment conglomerate's version of what the railroad companies accomplished in the 19th century while forging a manufactured landscape on the prairies, ascribing names like "Paradise" to a speculative patch of desolation that might a hundred years later be a bedrock community. Or that might have vanished.

Indeed, it is telling that Disney's first real community, Celebration, was modeled on the principles of New Urbanism, a doctrine that, no matter the intentions of its creators, has been popularly understood as suggesting a correspondence between the adoption of a simple and nostalgic vocabulary—white picket fences, front porches, and the like—and the development of a stable community. One could argue that this impulse comes directly from Disney. While a "sense of place" is a desirable design goal, it doesn't necessarily follow that this quality will lead to a "sense of community." As a resident of Celebration told the Orlando *Sentinel* earlier this year, "Our problem lies in the fact that expectations were far too high. Some people came in expecting miracles and instead were greeted with a reality in a nice wrapper."[16] It is clear that the rhetoric of the New Urbanists and the neo-Victoriana of towns like Celebration are feeding a hunger among American homebuyers; but it is much less clear that the marketplace can provide a viable substitute for a place-making process that depends upon such noncommercial factors as shared values, a sense of volunteerism, and a willingness to compromise. Communities do not come fully loaded and priced to move. At the end of my first foray into Disney World, I remember feeling very sad at having to leave: I dreamed of stowing away, as it were, in the park: a suburban Huck Finn drifting down a river of small town fantasy. Today there are many who still share that dream.

"Today it looks like Disneyland," laments an old Vegas hand in the film *Casino*. Sin City is not alone. Countless other places in America are said to have fallen under Disney's foreboding-ly cheerful penumbra: cleaned-up, standardized, rendered safe for the whole family, replicas of something rather than something. Disney's detractors and supporters alike, however, err in crediting the company and its theme parks with an excess of influence on the American landscape. "Destination retail outlets," segregated convention center districts, the Rouse Company's festival marketplaces: all are indebted somewhat to Disney (Rouse sent one of their planners to Disney World before building Quincy Marketplace in Boston), but all are more accurately understood as reflecting the prevailing economic order, specifically mass tourism and the increasing importance of brand aura rather than actual product. John Hannigan, in the recent *Fantasy City*, argues that "the 'Disneyfication' of our cities reflects a larger societal change toward the 'commodification' and 'passportisation' of experience. Today, people buy and collect 'leisure experiences' the same way they do consumer goods."[17] But this raises a question of historical perspective: what about the legions of visitors who poured through the gates of the World's Fairs and Coney Islands earlier in this century and returned loaded with tchotchkes? Were they engaging in a more authentic "experience"? Were the goods they bought any less "commodified"?

The CCA exhibition contends that the popularity of Disney's Main Street reawakened a preservationist impulse among residents of small towns, thereby helping to save many real Main Streets. But while Disney's Main Street surely represented a place that was everywhere in serious decline, myriad other depictions of classic small towns have been available throughout the culture. Indeed, along with the idealized wilderness, the small town has long occupied a sacred place in the American psyche; Disneyland was hardly the first mythologizing of this archetypal settlement. And restoring any particular real Main Street required more than good intentions and a dose of "pixie dust" brought back from California or Florida—one had to reverse exploding patterns of sprawl, overcome government policies, and arrest economic decline (downtown merchants, in competition with big-box retail, were finding it as hard as Walt's Main Street vendors to sell shoes). Even today, Marceline, Mo., Walt's hometown, clings to its psychic connection with Disney, but it has fewer residents now than when Walt lived there and its median annual income of $10,000 bodes ill for revitalization.

Similarly, the word "Disney" is now routinely attached to "themed architecture" or "entertainment architecture," but the Disney parks were hardly the first (or even most significant) example of architecture that expressed a theme or entertained. In Manhattan, where the clarion against

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Disneyfication has recently been sounded, one wonders at the precise cause for alarm. Fears of lost authenticity sound hollow in a city where themed restaurants (for instance, Murray's Roman Gardens) have existed since the turn of the century and a favorite museum is a reconstruction of a 12th-century Spanish cloister. In light of such liberties, does it matter whether the materials of any project are "original" or not? New York is filled with "themed" architecture that is today ensconced in the canon. What is the Chrysler Building, after all, but a formal and symbolic homage to the automobile and the power of American capital in an age of technological optimism? Disney's restored 42nd Street theaters represent a new stage of capitalism, and thus a new theme: they are monuments not to industry but to the image. Many Disney critics commit the same sins for which they fault Walt: mythologizing a place that never existed, and screening out social realities. Was 42nd Street a wonderfully seedy and vibrant place where diverse classes rubbed elbows? Or was it a dangerous sinkhole of decay and disinvestment? One Disney critic denounced as pure commodified fiction a hotel the company recently built near Orlando that evoked the great turn-of-the-century seaside hotels. Yet a century earlier, Henry James, in *The American Scene*, voiced much the same critique in his description of a Palm Beach hotel: "[I]t sits there, in its admirable garden, amid its statues and fountains, the hugeness of its more or less antique vases and sarcophagi—costliest reproductions all—as if to put to shame those remembered villas of the Lake of Como, of the Borromean Islands."[18] Those grand old hotels Disney mimics were themselves replicas of an aspired-to European past: thus is the "hunger for history," in James's words, sated by the dynamic capital of the forces of progress.

Disney's Celebration has unleashed a torrent of similar criticism, made more urgent by the development's status as a real city (or at least, it has real residents). Nightmarish predictions of life in a Disney company town where Animatronic characters wave from picture windows seem to have been premature. Disney has reduced its presence in the town, and much of the Utopian envisioning of community has been left to the community. Disney marketed Celebration as an experimental town without precedent in the United States, and critics have largely reinforced this notion. Celebration, though, is not a harbinger but an offshoot of an existing pattern, whereby corporate town-builders offer "community" as an amenity—as a perceived market advantage amid the problems of decaying inner-ring suburbia and disillusionment with random sprawl—and, on a larger scale, as an attempt to recreate the positive virtues of the past, however illusory they may be. It is easy to mock the promises of "tradition" and "community" that come with Celebration, but this kind of lingo is now the standard planned-community advertising pitch. The prospectus for the master-planned community of Valencia, California, collapsing time and space in similar fashion, asks "Are you yearning for a *place* where childhood was a *time* of innocence?" (my italics). Mock history, too, is not limited to Disney; it is found also in New Urbanist communities such as Riverside, Georgia, where residents invented a history for the town. ("We'd love for that history to be true," one resident told the *Wall Street Journal*. "But we didn't have that history here, so we're creating our own."[19]) Critics are right to question whether community can be arrived at through market responses, or even architectural ones. The writer Michael Pollan, visiting Celebration, asks, "To what extent can redesigning the physical world we inhabit—the streets, public spaces and buildings—foster a greater sense of community?"[20] Celebration's manufactured quality, however, should not be belabored. Every community is invented at some point, and Celebration is simply a late-capitalist entertainment conglomerate's version of what the railroad companies accomplished in the 19th century while forging a manufactured landscape on the prairies, ascribing names like "Paradise" to a speculative patch of desolation that might a hundred years later be a bedrock community. Or that might have vanished.

It is tempting to conclude that Americans have become alienated from place, just as Marx said workers had become alienated from their labor. What does land mean, anyway, when we do not have to live off it? In an era of lifestyle marketing and brand-name identity, we now want *place* to confer similar ready-made associations: the cookies don't have to be made from scratch, they should just *look* that way. In this light, the case of Disney's Main Street—the one with tourists and the one with residents (a shrinking distinction)—represents a recent stage of place fetishism. Disney's parks, much like Colonial Williamsburg or Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, are bastions of nostalgia that say much about the present: exemplars of what Leo Marx famously called the "the machine in the garden," that impulse to romanticize the pastoral as it is overrun by the industrial. Disney's parks contain both simulated wilderness and the machines once viewed as an encroachment—the steamboat, the railroad, the rocket—and in the end everything is idealized. Walt "eliminated the contradictions." Yet if his methods were novel, his impulse was not. In harkening back to Main Street, manipulating the landscape, and installing simulated animals, Disney was, as the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan notes, echoing the Renaissance and Baroque nobility who employed the same technical tricks and nostalgia in building their palaces and pleasure gardens.[21]

The gardens signified escape, nostalgia, and the preservation of a mythical Eden. They were fantasy lands, as Disney's parks are fantasy lands. Yet fantasy is everywhere, and Disney, despite its size, has no monopoly. For Freud, the American landscape was rife with manifestations of some deep-

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er longing. "The creation of the mental domain of phantasy has a complete counterpart in the establishment of 'reservations' and 'nature-parks' in places where the inroads of agriculture, traffic, or industry threaten to change."[22] The preservation of nature, like the preservation of Main Street, is an act of both will and imagination. A national park, after all, is not a wilderness but a "themed environment" whose theme is nature. In the end, Disney is not at odds with a real city or a real landscape, but rather a very real part of each. The Disney empire is, of course, an economic force in a world where, as David Harvey points out, capital creates and destroys its own landscape.[23] But more significantly, the hope that Disney generates says much about the timeless desire to preserve some version of the past through the tools and zeitgeist of the present. The fear Disney augurs, conversely, hints at the insecurities of our ability, in the present, to improve the future.

Notes

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