Walt Disney World, Florida: The Creation of a Fantasy Landscape

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In 1971 an 11,100-hectare amusement area named Walt Disney World was opened in central Florida near Orlando. Within it was the Magic Kingdom, the first of three large theme parks located there by 1991. The venture rapidly became an international success, and annual attendance today is approximately 30 million. It is the most visited privately owned tourist facility in the world. More than any other economic activity, including the Kennedy Space Center on Cape Canaveral, it has generated economic growth in central Florida.

Conceptualization of the Park

Walter E. (Walt) Disney was most responsible for a new concept in amusement parks which after World War II revitalized a dying industry (Mosley 1986; Thomas 1976). He proposed to build a park based upon themes. As in the older ones, there would be thrill rides, but it would lack many of the carnival-like amusements that earned the older parks such a bad reputation among middle-class American families. The ambience of his park would be one of scrupulous cleanliness, and be totally non-threatening. Employees, most of whom would be young, were expected to adhere to a rigid code of appearance and were to be cheerful at all times.

Disney was confident that if his park projected the ambience of wholesomeness, it would become highly profitable. He based this optimism on the post World War II national prosperity, greater use of automobiles, and the baby boom. He believed that many of these new families willingly would drive long distances to a park with themes to entertain young children. Disney chose themes based on fairy tales, adventure stories, folklore, nostalgia, and future technologies. In sum, the goal was to create a friendly and wholesome environment in which visitors could have a pleasant escape from reality and exercise their imagination.

Disneyland opened near Los Angeles in 1955 (Bright 1987). It was divided into six sections, each built around a theme: Main Street U.S.A., Adventureland, Fantasyland, Tomorrowland, New Orleans Square, and Frontierland. Characters and themes from Disney’s animated movies were employed throughout, particularly Mickey Mouse, who became the central figure of Disneyland, and later the Magic Kingdom in Florida.

Location of Walt Disney World

Disney conceived Walt Disney World shortly after he opened Disneyland. It was to be much larger in scale and would necessitate a huge tract of land. The purchase of a large tract was intended to provide ample area for expansion and to create a buffer between it and the numerous non-Disney attractions that would be drawn to compete for visitors (Thomas 1976). Important location factors were accessibility to a large number of people, proximity to a city large enough to provide labor, and a climate that would permit operation throughout the year.

Disney chose Florida. Although far from the nation’s large cities, it was already popular with tourists and had a state government receptive to investments in tourism. The Orlando area was warm enough for year-round operations and was near the crossing of several limited-access highways, part of the nation’s interstate highway system, then under intensive development.
Disney assembled this huge tract of land very cheaply by dealing with agents who had no idea they were working for him. He realized that had the owners known whom they were selling their land to, which was mostly poor palmetto pasture, they would have inflated the value greatly.

Disney desired as little interference from government as possible in the development of the property and was pleased that the Florida legislature awarded him special governmental status over the land purchase (Walsh 1986). The 11,100-hectare tract was named the Reedy Creek Improvement District. In effect it became the 68th county in the state, with authority over electric power, water, zoning codes, and fire protection. Police and judicial authority continued to rest with the two counties in which the land was situated, and the park pays county property taxes. Although Disney World today employs approximately 35,000 workers, there are only about 40 voting residents of the district, most Disney employees.

The special status of Disney World has led to tensions between it and the counties in which it is situated (Walsh 1986). Whereas other developers must pay impact fees to the county for roads and other public construction at the time they develop their property, Disney does not. Many believe Walt Disney Company is not contributing its fair share for the development of the area's infrastructure. Disney executives maintain that they have made substantial contributions, citing the company as the major force behind the growth of the region's economy.

There is no dispute that the Disney operation was the principal stimulant for growth in central Florida. In 1971, the year the Magic Kingdom opened, Florida tourism was much more uniformly distributed throughout the state than it is today. Most tourists vacationed along the beaches of the lower peninsula. Orlando, in the interior of the upper half of the peninsula, had comparatively little appeal to either tourists or retirees. In 1971, when the Magic Kingdom opened, approximately 450,000 inhabitants lived in the Orlando metropolitan area. Twenty years later, in 1990, the population had risen to slightly over 1 million. Among the nation's metropolitan statistical areas, including that of New York City, Orlando and Las Vegas, Nevada, continually exchange the lead in the number of hotel and motel rooms.

Creating a Sense of Place

Anthropologist Alexander Moore (1980) compares a visit to the Magic Kingdom to a religious pilgrimage. He believes that its success may be attributed to people being exposed since childhood to Disney images. Whether we can accept such an analogy, most who visit it become emotionally absorbed by it. They come to feel that, as Disney wished, "They are in another world" (Mosely 1986).

The Magic Kingdom is deep in the interior of Walt Disney World. It is reached by mass transportation either from Disney's own hotels within the park, or by car and bus from hotels outside the park. An especially large concentration of hotels outside the park has grown up along International Drive (Figure 1). Depending on the season of the year, between 25,000 and 75,000 guests are admitted to the Magic Kingdom each day. Many thousands more visit Disney World's two newer theme parks, EPCOT and Disney-MGM Studio Theme Park.

Guests to the Magic Kingdom (in Disney parks all visitors are referred to as "guests") go to its Transportation and Ticket Center. Here they purchase tickets to the Magic Kingdom, or a “passport” to visit all three parks (Birnbaum 1989). Although it is not nec-

Figure 1. Disney World (11,000 hectares) is southwest of Orlando on U.S. Route 4.
essary, those who wish to heighten the illusion they are going into a different world can exchange U.S. dollars for one- and five-dollar Disney bills. From the ticket office, guests have a choice of reaching the Magic Kingdom by paddle-wheeled ferry boat across artificial Bay Lake or by monorail.

Even before arriving at the entrance to the Magic Kingdom all but the most calm begin to be swept into the spirit that Disney strove to generate. The sheer size of a typical day's crowd, which includes many children, heightens the excitement. People who visit the park marvel at crowd control. Although there are often long lines at popular attractions, the attendants move people through with great efficiency.

Upon entrance to the Magic Kingdom the first theme area or "land" entered is Main Street, U.S.A., the Disney concept of a late-19th-century small-town main street. Main Street, U.S.A., provides an excellent opportunity to appreciate the attention to detail that is the hallmark of all Disney attractions. It is used here as an exemplar of the other theme areas within the park.

The buildings are careful reconstructions of structures of the period (Goldberger 1972). Detractors argue that no main street at the end of the 19th century was as clean as Disney's. Draft horses pull streetcars down Main Street, but droppings or litter of any sort never remain on the ground for long, thanks to a crew of constantly vigilant sanitation workers. From a railroad station near Main Street one can take a train around the perimeter of the Magic Kingdom. The old steam locomotive that pulls the train is one of four salvaged in 1969 from an abandoned Mexican railroad system.

Illusion is vital in the creation of the Magic Kingdom's landscape. The kingdom seems much larger than it actually is. Buildings often are not built to true scale, or lower floors are, but the upper ones are not (Bright 1987). Many features are scaled down for children. Throughout the park are numerous examples of tricks of scale, to make buildings appear much taller or more distant through design. This technique, called "forced perspective," had earlier been refined by movie-set designers in Hollywood.

Since it is the visitor's first impression of the Magic Kingdom, to heighten the level of excitement, Main Street also is the venue for much of the Kingdom's live street entertainment. This entertainment includes a 19th-century barber shop quartet, strolling banjo players twice each evening during the busiest periods of the year, and a parade featuring a marching band and approximately 30 floats. From Main Street most move toward Cinderella's Castle (Figure 2), in the center of Magic Kingdom. Here roads lead directly to the other theme sections of the park.

Design and Construction of EPCOT

Walt Disney World's second theme park, EPCOT, opened in 1982. In design it bore little resemblance to what Disney himself had proposed in 1966, when the Florida property was purchased. In Disney's words Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow "will take its cue from the new ideas and new technologies that are now emerging from the creative centers of American industry" (Mosley 1986). It was never to be completed, but would always be introducing, testing, and demonstrating new materials and systems. It would be "a showcase to the world for the ingenuity and imagination of American free enterprise."

Instead of a community, what emerged was a park with two theme sections, Future World and World Showcase. Disney planners recognized that the demographic profile of the nation was changing as the baby boom children became adults (Lyon 1987). They wanted to build a park with themes that would appeal to this group. Future World was built with corporate financial support, including giants such as General Motors, General Electric, and Exxon. Within it are exhibitions, in the style of a World's Fair, that explain...
technological evolution. World Showcase is a joint development between Disney and a number of nations.

The exhibition areas of the countries were designed to incorporate popular visual impressions of them. On the "typical" English high street at the United Kingdom exhibition are half-timbered buildings that lean and have hand-painted smoke stains that make them appear to be centuries old. Some roofs are of thatch, but fire regulations demand that the material be non-flammable plastic. Mansard roofs are conspicuous at both the Canadian and French areas, and the French area is distinguished by a large model of the Eiffel Tower. Italy is depicted by a corner of Venice's St. Marks Square, including the campanile and the Doge's Palace, set on EPCOT's lagoon with a seawall that has been made to appear stained with age. Most national exhibitions have souvenir shops as well as restaurants where guests can sample the national cuisine. The United States is represented in World Showcase by a colonial style brick building where a 30-minute film panorama of American history is narrated by robots representing Ben Franklin and Mark Twain.

Detractors criticize Future World for too heavily relying upon technology to solve the world's problems (American Heritage 1987; Harrington 1979; Morison 1983). Those who disparage World Showcase, particularly the United States show, often say that history is put in too positive a perspective (Morison 1983). Disney officials make no apologies for their presentations in either section.

Physical geographers should find the landscaping throughout Walt Disney World of great interest, especially that of the national exhibits at EPCOT. The climate of central Florida is humid subtropical, while that of most of the exhibiting nations is colder or drier. Furthermore, the park is open all year, and designers did not want the landscape to differ radically between one season and another. Imaginative substitutions often were made by the park's horticulturists to create natural landscapes exotic to that of central Florida (Birnbaum 1989). For example, at the Canadian exhibit hemlock trees are represented by deodar cedars, a tree native of the Himalayas that is better adapted to Florida's hot summers. Geometrically sculptured bushes in the British exhibit are not yews but podocarpus. The European plane tree does not grow well in Florida. Where this tree is needed the western sycamore, of the same genus, has been substituted. At the French exhibit sycamores are pruned to about 6.1 meters (20 feet), and have developed the same characteristic knots found on plane trees along French streets.

Conclusion

No person in American history has more effectively imprinted on the nation's public the visual conception of a utopian and fantasy landscape than Walt Disney. Although he was a political and economic conservative, and some have accused him of both racial and ethnic prejudice, from his youth he had a utopian vision of community acquired from his father, an outspoken socialist (Harrington 1979; Mosley 1986). While EPCOT departed from his original conception, Disney would most likely approve of its attempt to bring the world together in a peaceful, orderly, and educational setting. He would have been delighted with the evolution of the Magic Kingdom, and Walt Disney World's newest park, Disney-MGM Studio Theme Park. At the inauguration of Disneyland, the progenitor of the Magic Kingdom, Disney said, "I don't want the public to see the real world they live in while they're in the park. I want them to feel they are in another world" (Mosley 1986). The Walt Disney Company is now successfully involved in joint theme park ventures in Japan and France, proving that the Disney landscape can appeal to the inhabitants of nations whose cultures are distinct from ours.

References

A Bad Ride at Disney World

I'm going to Disney World," said Lorena Bobbitt cheerily upon being released from the particular set of ordeals that had become her life. It's become a common tag line for Americans celebrating such closures, or simply suffering from that old "there-must-be-some-way-out-of-here" feeling of postmodern frenzy. Disney World: the ultimate escape, the "nowhere" destination that is "just like the world, only better." After all these years of avoiding it, I had begun to feel pressure to check it out. For one thing, it had become difficult to face my Long Island students as a Disney virgin, and maintain credibility as an authority on popular culture. And so I dragged my daughter (the one person always willing to accompany me into cultural terrain where no one else will be caught dead) and headed south, at the height of the summer-vacation season, to meet the Head Mouse.

It was an experience for which, I confess, I was ill prepared. To visit Disney World is to be transported, in more ways than one: to be immersed in a universe that is somehow totally "Other," "Elsewhere," even as it is—paradoxically—the most mundanely quintessential of American landscapes.

There's nothing here that you haven't seen or experienced a million times, every day of your life, in every mall and airport and multiplex and fast-food franchise. And yet, to find yourself—like Dorothy in Munchkin Land—suddenly set down in the middle of a vast landscape in which no trace of anything noncommercialized, nonobstructed, non-smiley-faced, is visible or reachable, is to suffer a profoundly mental disorientation. Most people seem gleefully and instantaneously to adapt to this new psychic environment. I did not do so well.

"Transported" is actually a perfect term to describe the experience of being Disney-fied. From the minute you hit the Orlando airport, you enter a system of transit that moves you effortlessly, via monorails and people movers, through underground tunnels decorated, almost nostalgically, with scenes of the "real" Florida, the one that Disney so strenuously attempts to supersede and render superserious. From there, it's a quick ride to the 28,000-acre enclave—a self-contained, self-regulated fiefdom in the middle of, but wholly separate from, the state of Florida. And then it's into another, even more elaborate system of monorails that whisk you, with utmost efficiency and ease, through a series of prescribed routes to preplanned itineraries.

"Day One," begins the Disney guidebook you probably selected from a shelf full of choices—Disney With Kids, Disney on a Budget, Disney for Honeymooners, Disney Without Kids—at your local Barnes and Noble. And then come pages of dauntingly detailed, rigidly precise schedules of events and sights and rides, accompanied by timetables, tips, rules, and coupons to help you complete the exhausting course.

"You must stay at least six days," said my travel agent, with a Disneyesque cheeriness, "or you'll never see everything." Never mind that "everything" on Day Six was pretty much the same as "everything" on Day One.

Indeed, the sameness, the static predictability of this wholly managed, wholly simulated world of "Taylorized fun," as it's been described, seems to be a large part of its appeal. Nothing can possibly go wrong here, because nothing can possibly happen.

But the nothing that endlessly doesn't happen is designed to fill the senses and the hours with comfort, amusement, and a kind of luxury not typical of most American lives. The "family-rate" hotels and restaurants of Disney World are commodious, yet relatively affordable and free of the appearance of class distinction. Our hotel room was by far the largest and most lush I've ever occupied at my own expense. The hotel restaurants were surprisingly posh, too. And since none of the 26,000 "cast" members who served us (no one works at Disney World, even the staff of waiters, cleaning persons, yard workers, and so on are "players," dressed up in Disney costumes) is allowed to frown or be rude or irritable, the service is regal.

There is a "style" at Disney World that—in sharp contrast, certainly, to my Manhattan neighborhood—is uniform in its middle American, asexual, uninflected sameness. Oversize unisex T-shirts and walking shorts—almost all, save those of the Day One new arrivals, marked by Disney logos—are the standard-issue garments from which most visitors diverge in only minor ways. (A young woman in our hotel dressed in high fashion "cruise wear" stood out as odd.)

This sense of classless luxury and unthreatening sameness has its attractions. People who visit regularly as children develop attachments to the place. Many even choose to get married here. There was a Disney wedding during our stay, actually, to which we were invited—via telecast. The groom, who had proposed here the previous year, gave the bride a gilt-edged Disney Cinderella book and a shopping trip to Treasure Island. The bride told the world that she first fell for him because, "He had very good manners; that was important to me."

Good manners are important to everyone at Disney World. So is shopping. And Treasure Island—like virtually every edifice of every kind in Disney World, whether a restaurant, a hotel, a ride, or an actual store—is filled with virtually identical items of clothing, housewares, food, toys, games, and media products all imprinted with the Disney motifs.

There is a synthetic spirit of democracy about all this that is seductive. The working-class family that has saved all year for a week's vacation is indistinguishable from the CEO and his kids who are virtually slumming. The stress of competition—whether sexual, material, or status—seems to dissolve. I have never seen so many small children forced to wait in so many long lines in so much heat with so little nagging, whining, crying, or fighting. Nor have I ever spent so much time with so many people and seen and heard so little unpleasantness, conflict, hostility. And why should there be any? These are the very things one comes to Disney World to escape.

I overheard one couple telling another that they had flown all the way from California, although they could have gone much more cheaply to Disneyland, because "you really get away from the world here. It's like an oasis in the middle of nowhere. No one can get to you and you don't have to worry about what's going on in the world." That, it seems, is how most people want it. Every morning when I bought my New York Times there were five copies on the counter. Every evening when I returned, four were still there.

My grandmother would have said, "So what's not to like?" (My students' version was, "Like, you didn't like it? Like, that is just too weird!") My daughter Alison and I did indeed feel un-American, but by Day Three we were bored silly, and by Day Four we were seriously bored.

Even Epcot Center's famously "erudite" (by mass-culture standards) presentation of scientific, historic, and geographic wonders, at first intriguing, was ultimately a drag—but again, a pervasively
expanding “city-state”—it has its own police force, taxation system, and governing administration—that draws 100,000 people to its gates each day. A total of thirty million a year.

Disney’s dream was explicitly utopian. He was a man who believed in the American Dream, its supposed inevitability, and the greatness of Americanism itself. Let’s dwell over and over and over again—the elaborately constructed national and scientific pavilions.

Disney’s vision and ambition—the sheer productivity that mark the greatest achievements of human civilization. commodities and services upon which the American project, technology, the free market, and mass education have all been channeled into the service of an elaborate vision of a classless, stress-free, immaculate land of plenty and harmony.

What’s missing in Disney’s model, of course, is the class, race, and gender strife that American technological and economic progress has, in truth, been built upon. In Disney’s utopia there is no poverty, no crime, no blood, no dirt. The idea that nature might be “red in tooth and claw” was utterly foreign to Disney’s world view. But even more than blood, he abhorred dirt.

Indeed, it is no accident that Disney’s central ambassador is a neutered, hairless, civilized rodent—by nature the filthy scourgery of every slum in the developed world. Disney is quoted as saying proudly, on more than one occasion, that “Mickey is a clean mouse.” But I could not help thinking, while touring Mickey’s empire, of the New Yorker cartoon in which a bunch of scraggly, highly uncivilized rats peer at a framed oil painting of the Great One in a museum and mutter, “Yeah, but what has he done for his people?”

Mickey, of course, has no “people.” And the real “people” who run the place—who do indeed bleed and sweat and get dirty as they work to make Disney World function—are invisible. Ineptly, the park is built above an underground system of tunnels that hides the infrastructure of the park and the workers who keep it functional. The “plenty” of Disney’s utopia is not a form we can tolerate—indeed consume—without fear. While I was put off by the audacity of Disney’s vision and ambition—the sheer gall of his belief that he might actually hang a paper moon over the ruin that commerce has made of our living space and call it Heaven—I could certainly understand why many chose to ignore the transparent ruse and enjoy the ride they had saved and paid for. It is the illusion of absolute escape that, understandably and justifiably, people come here to experience.

Everyone knows, down deep, that the real world of work and worry and credit-card bills that made the trip possible is waiting and that all the social and political problems of home are right there waiting. And if they choose—as I did not—to repress that truth for the duration, who could blame them?

I returned to Manhattan with pleasure. I love New York for the very reasons so many people hate it. In New York everything that’s stressful and scary about today’s world, everything Disney tries to deny and mask, is right there, in your face, all the time, everywhere. No one pretends to be or feel anything but the raw truth. The tension and despair are entirely visible in the blank faces of those who beg on the subways, who rant their mad magical prayers for salvation on every street corner, who sleep and eat in the cardboard boxes discarded by those who have too much of everything and still demand more.

Disney World is the ultimate effort to deny all that, to create mass social amnesia and blindness. But anyone visiting Times Square (where Disney’s latest gargantuan plan to clear the landscapes of reality and replace them with synthetic versions is in the planning stages) knows that his is ultimately a fool’s errand. Times Square and its squalid, street-wise denizens—its pimps and whores and runaways and druggies and hustlers and indigents—are not going away and they are not about to let Disney World’s version of America erase their own nasty reality from sight. The poor and elderly and feeble, the deranged and addicted and destitute, the runaways from the real middle America, the social and sexual and esthetic “deviants” whose tastes refuse to be contained by the puritan ethic enforced by Disney—all these are going to stubbornly cling to the skirts of the bachelors and Ken and their state-of-the-art camping gear.

I felt depressed on our last morning, reading The New York Times, dressed inappropriately in black, mentally shooing away the larger-than-life Mickey and Pluto that wander about chatting up the customers and offering coupons to do ever more Disney things. And yet, it would be unfair to say that I didn’t understand or appreciate the charm of the place—especially for families with young kids.

While Disney, a visionary if there ever was one and a serious social thinker in his way, has the seeds of what has become a $22 billion empire of entertainment, media, theme parks, and consumer goods. And the signature achievement of his lifelong dream is Disney World, an ever-