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Individual Critical Study

**Constructed Spaces:**

*Disney and the Art of Valuing Commodity*
Abstract

The Disney name is practically synonymous with fun, family, and innocence. Millions of people each year visit Disney theme parks and resorts. Times Square in New York City has been transformed by the Disney Company into a tourist-friendly consumer space. The Disney community of Celebration in Florida is a thriving town built on the concepts of community welfare and interaction. All of these attractions are constructed on the premise that the American consumer desires the values implicit in the Disney experience. In the following paper, I will investigate questions about these values. Specifically, what does the Disney experience offer to an audience? Why and how does the consumer participate and seek out this experience? Who is excluded from Disney experiences? To attempt to answer these questions, I will examine three of Disney’s constructed spaces—Disney theme parks, Times Square, and the community of Celebration. By investigating the history, construction, and present use of these spaces, I will show that the desire for the Disney brand and all the values associated with it often takes precedence over an equal inclusion of voices in the Disney experience.
**Introduction**

The Disney experience, whether it happens in theme parks, Times Square, or the community of Celebration, Florida, is constructed and tightly controlled to achieve maximum predictability and security. In the construction of Disney spaces, all roads lead to an act of consumption, specifically a consumption of the Disney brand and all the ideas and values associated with that brand. What do the consumers of both Disney products and culture value in the controlled and constructed Disney experience? Why are these values so significant to so many Americans? Antonio Gramsci’s description of hegemony may provide a framework for understanding these questions:

> the permeation throughout civil society…of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality, etc., that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it…To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the broad masses, it becomes part of “common sense.”¹

Walt Disney World is the top vacation destination in the United States. Over 30 million people a year visit Walt Disney World and its various hotels and resorts.² Through Disney’s films, theme parks and business ventures, the Disney brand has been disseminated to a massive amount of people. The Disney Company is continually expanding its reach, selling its brand and products through such unlikely venues as a planned community and a reconstructed city block.

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² Fjellman 10.
This essay will look at Disney’s constructed spaces, specifically theme parks and communities (both the literal Disney community of Celebration and the Disney sponsored “community” of Times Square), and will examine them as ways to determine what is valued in the Disney experience.

The Theme Parks

Walt Disney created Disneyland, the first Disney theme park and arguably the first theme park of any sort, in California in 1955. Disneyland was created as a wonderland of fun for all ages and so, protected from the intrusion of the outside world by a literal barrier, put forth a mission to showcase both an advancing technology and a persistent nostalgia.\(^3\) In part, Disneyland was created as an alternative to the American amusement park of the early 1900’s epitomized by Coney Island which invited visitors from all classes to subvert the technological structures of 20\(^{th}\) century industry and “reap the pleasures of challenging social hierarchies” through a variety of pseudo-sexual and unrestricted interactions with others.\(^4\)

In these terms, the Disney theme park experience is the direct opposite of that found at Coney Island. Disneyland and Walt Disney World, built in 1971 after the success of Disneyland\(^5\), are instead harmless and commercialized spaces of amusement for a relatively homogenized and well-behaved crowd. Dirt, garbage, crime, and other afflictions of the outside world are conspicuously absent at Disney World. The sterile

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atmosphere of fun and fantasy is, in large part, a draw for the more than 50 million people per year who visit Disney theme parks.\textsuperscript{6}

The Disney World theme park is a strange land hovering somewhere between Main Street, U.S.A.’s “turn-of-the-20\textsuperscript{th}-century America” and Future World’s modern Mission: SPACE ride that gives visitors “a chance to experience the excitement and intensity of space travel without actually leaving the planet.”\textsuperscript{7} Main Street in the Magic Kingdom is an idealized version of small town America from the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, where everything remains clean, safe and new. Upon entering the gates of the Magic Kingdom, visitors (or “guests” in Disneyspeak) are immediately placed into a narrative delineated by the forced perspective of the Main Street architecture and perpetuated by the “cast members” with their themed costumes and the subtly guiding walkways. Guests become characters in the story, playing out their roles within a built movie set. This entrance into the theme park narrative is largely passive and the experience is controlled; it involves waiting in lines, being strapped in and mechanically transported through rides and engaging in scripted viewing. At the same time, entering this narrative presents the main opportunities for amusement at the Magic Kingdom. As the guest crosses over into the fantasy world, he or she fully realizes the “fun” of Disney\textsuperscript{8} and can thus justify the money, time, and effort spent on the Disney vacation. Inherently problematic is the lack of free play and real participation, especially in terms of the futuristic attractions at Disney World. Inability to actively participate in rides that tell a symbolic story of the

\textsuperscript{7} Birnbaum 102,139.
future implies an inability for participation in that future and the technologies implicit in it.

One way in which active participation is available and certainly encouraged at Disney World is through shopping. Birnbaum’s Walt Disney World guide devotes sections in every land to recommendations for shopping. The guide advises: “No one travels all the way to the Magic Kingdom just to go shopping. But as many a first-time visitor has learned with some surprise, shopping is one of the most enjoyable pastimes here.” To get to all the lands, rides and attractions in the Magic Kingdom, guests must first stroll down Main Street, a single byway lined with shops selling anything from conventional Disney souvenirs to crystal vases and cookware. Each land in Disney World has shops that relate to its theme, offering for purchase a “stage prop” which acts both as a physical reminder of the places visited as well as a tangible demonstration of the visitor’s participation in those places. One can move through the merchandise from one land to the next. As Susan Willis states, “Shopping is a ride not unlike the other amusements.”

Passive consuming is one way in which visitors can participate in the future at EPCOT. The narrative of this space would read as one of constant progression toward some idealized future in which corporate sponsorship of technology is an integral agent. In the 1970s when EPCOT was being planned and built, a number of multinational corporations signed on to sponsor rides in which life in the 21st century would be portrayed. The rides offer a corporate version of the history of America starting in

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9 Birnbaum 119.
Prehistoric times and leading into the future, or the future as it was conceived when EPCOT was built. As one example, General Motors’s history of transportation ride brings the viewer to the culmination of the transportation lineage with the invention and mass-production of the car. The ride ends in a showroom of new GM models, reminding the visitor that one way to participate in the epic on ongoing history of American transportation is to purchase a car.\footnote{Wallace, Mike, Mickey Mouse History, and Other Essays on American Memory (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) 145-147.}

Main Street at Disneyland became the model for the development of the shopping mall in America.\footnote{Wallace 138.} Perhaps the reasons Americans patronize malls are similar to the reasons so many Americans vacation at Disney World. By the 1970’s, American shopping malls were immensely popular, as demonstrated by the sheer amount of time people spent in them. The mall became something distinctly American; it was a consumer space that supported and developed alongside with the suburbs. Both areas were meant to be wholesome and convenient, offering feelings of community and safety. The shopping mall is a private space that is highly controlled in terms of access and use, which leads to a homogeneity in the demographic and function of the mall’s visitors.\footnote{Jackson, Kenneth T., “All the World’s a Mall: Reflections on the Social and Economic Consequences of the American Shopping Center,” Critical Cultural Policy Studies, A Reader, eds. Lewis, Justin and Toby Miller (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) 329-333.}

Likewise, Disney theme parks are private spaces full of copyrighted images. Public use is controlled and constructed to encourage certain functions (shopping, looking, walking) and exclude others (spontaneous play, interacting, touching). From attraction to attraction, visitors can place themselves in a narrative of an American history in which citizenship rests on consuming corporate products and participating in a capitalist system.
In an America that is “thought to contain infinite number of nations,” and which represents worldly economic and political structures through a backdrop of “demographic intermingling,” how is it possible for the most popular vacation destination to represent only a small strata of those mixed demographics? Disney World attracts a primarily upper middle class crowd, three-quarters of whom are employed as managers, technical personnel or professionals. 3% of the audiences are black and 2% are Hispanic. The lack of diversity in these numbers is likely a direct reflection of the cost of admission, hotel stay, and transportation to and from the park. For 2006, the base price of a one-day ticket to one land within Disney World is $59.75 for an adult (ages 10 and older) and $48 for a child (aged 3-9). For a family, the cost of a vacation at Disney World could easily reach into the thousands of dollars. But for those who can afford it, a Disney vacation is an opportunity to confirm the family unit, and indeed, much of the interaction that happens on a trip to Disney World is confined within the family unit. Rides generally discourage interaction with strangers or even park workers. The family in the Disney theme park is a primary unit of consumption and reinforces conservative, capitalist family values.

**Times Square**

In his book, *Reconstructing Times Square*, Alexander J. Reichl outlines the planning and implementation of the renovation of 42nd street in New York City from the late 1980’s through the 1990’s. The plan that was approved by the mayor in 1980 was

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15 Adams 146. These numbers are from the early 1990’s.
16 Birnbaum 24.
one which would aspire to economically revitalize Times Square, an area which logistically and geographically “represented an enormous and untapped economic potential,” due largely to it’s proximity to the theatre, garment and midtown office districts.\(^{17}\) The project included construction of entertainment attractions built around the historic theaters, a large hotel and merchandise mart, and a group of office towers, all within a three-block area and proposed to be designed and built through a public-private partnership.\(^{18}\)

What was the motivating factor in the revitalization of Times Square? The history of the area provides a framework for this question. Prohibition and the Great Depression had gradually impacted the Times Square of the 1920’s and 1930’s, transforming it from its brief pinnacle as a booming entertainment district into a less flashy Mecca for burlesque shows, prostitution, vagrancy and low-class popular entertainment. By the 1960’s, Times Square was populated by sex shops and strip clubs.\(^{19}\) Generally labeled as a symbol of urban decline, the space was in fact one in which inexpensive entertainment, adult and non-adult in nature, was available to residents of some of the poorest city neighborhoods.\(^{20}\) Like Coney Island, Times Square was one of the only areas in Manhattan where mixed classes could interact and equally participate in entertainment activities. Reichl notes that this diversity, or the underlying racial tensions and fears stemming from it, became an important symbol for justification of the renovation of Times Square. He writes, “While urban development is a reasonable response to urban decline, the fact is that development is ultimately about making money,

\(^{17}\) Reichl, Alexander J., Reconstructing Times Square, Politics and Culture in Urban Development (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999) 78.

\(^{18}\) Reichl 92.

\(^{19}\) Reichl 54-59.

\(^{20}\) Reichl 1-2.
not solving social problems.”\textsuperscript{21} Zoning ordinances which gave the state power to eliminate cultural activities deemed “objectionable, non-conforming and detrimental to the character of any given area”\textsuperscript{22} provided the justification for eliminating the sex shops, peep shows, and porn theatres that had been an integral part of the cultural fabric of Times Square.

Legal difficulties and public contention about the nature of the development plan led to its stagnation into the early 1990’s. The hotel and merchandise mart developers dropped out of the project, leaving significant gaps in funding and participation. Many of the less desirable shops and buildings had been vacated and were sitting empty. To get the redevelopment effort moving, the city approved a new temporary plan which would renovate existing buildings for entertainment uses, opting for preservation and restoration instead of demolition and reconstruction.\textsuperscript{23} New York Times architecture critic Herbert Muschamp categorized the project as largely symbolic: “The goal of the [interim] plan is not so much to overhaul the street physically as to reconstruct the people’s perception of it.”\textsuperscript{24} A major player in this change of perception was the Walt Disney Company, which was brought into the Times Square renovation project officially in 1995.\textsuperscript{25}

Before agreeing to become a pioneer corporation in the reconstruction of Times Square, the Disney Company spent years formalizing the agreement and its terms with the City of New York. Accustomed to a large degree of control over its built environments, Disney was searching for similar levels of security and assured

\textsuperscript{21} Reichl 2.  
\textsuperscript{23} Reichl 144-149.  
\textsuperscript{24} Reichl 150.  
\textsuperscript{25} Comella, 318.
profitability in their proposed renovation of the New Amsterdam Theater on 42\textsuperscript{nd} Street. Disney managed to secure these conditions in a variety of ways. The city agreed to pay for the cost of acquiring the site as well as subsidize approximately 75\% of the cost of the $34 million renovation. For what amounted to a small investment by Disney, the company had a newly renovated landmark theater to showcase its live productions. Disney also required that at least three Disney approved companies be committed to locations on 42\textsuperscript{nd} Street before Disney would formally agree to participate. When all these pieces fell into place, Disney finally formalized its agreement with the city. In addition to renovation of the New Amsterdam Theater, Disney also submitted a design to the re-opened bidding on the originally planned hotel site. Disney won, beating out the financially secure and ultra-prepared Marriott team, who decried the decision as simply a further commitment to the Disney name. In 1996, Disney opened a superstore on 42\textsuperscript{nd} Street.\textsuperscript{26}

Times Square began to resemble Disney theme park—a tightly controlled and constructed environment devoted to safe family entertainment and consumerism. The family and tourist friendly Disney brand ensured participation by other investing businesses and popular support for the new project. By giving so much unprecedented leeway to the Disney Company, city officials guaranteed the economic viability of the newly homogenized, commercialized and harmlessly tourist-centric Times Square that, in effect, perpetuated and disseminated Disney’s corporate philosophy throughout the area. This economic viability had its cost. It marginalized the previous shop-owners and patrons of Times Square by deeming them undesirable and economically worthless. The

\textsuperscript{26} Riechl 158-159.
vibrant, edgy and multi-layered history of Times Square was buried under the shiny new image of the space as a Disney attraction.

Celebration, Florida

Walt Disney’s original idea for EPCOT center is best described by its name—Experimental Prototype Community of the Future. Walt envisioned not the amusement park rides and attractions that make up EPCOT today, but instead a place where people could live and work in an actual community designed by contemporary planners and furnished with the latest technologies from American corporations. After Walt’s death, his utopian plans for EPCOT were morphed into the theme park attraction it remains today. The idea of community building, however, would resurface in the Disney Company in 1984, instigated not by a desire to revolutionize community planning but as a way to turn undeveloped land into profit and extend the reach of the Disney brand.27

When Walt bought land for Walt Disney World in Florida, he intentionally bought more land than would ever be needed for the theme park—27,433 acres. The extra land served as a buffer zone around the park, ensuring that guests would feel isolated and be able to forget the stresses of everyday life and the outside world.28 The impending development of the land, the promise of newly created jobs and increases in tourism allowed Disney to justify its demands that the company have nearly complete control over the land. Haydon Burns, the Florida governor in 1967, allowed Disney to create the Reedy Creek Improvement District, which made it possible for the company to

28 Lassell 25.
create and regulate its own infrastructure and zoning laws, levy taxes, and exempt it from many state laws.\textsuperscript{29}

In the 1980’s much of the land around the park was just as it was when Walt bought it—a mix of swampy wetlands and old cattle pastures. When Michael Eisner was hired to help bolster the weakening company in 1984, he began to reevaluate the company’s vast land holdings in Florida. Rather than selling about 10,000 unused acres south of the park and risk its development into “unexciting, uncreative development,” the company decided to transform the land into a Disney housing community that would come to be called Celebration.\textsuperscript{30}

Although technically the land that Celebration would be built on was a part of the Reedy Creek Improvement District, if Disney included the new town in its authority residents would be able to vote on issues in the district, i.e. changes and developments in Walt Disney World and the rest of Disney’s land in Florida. To ensure this was not the case, Disney gave up a large part of its autonomy over the town by de-annexing it and subjecting it to the laws, regulations and codes of Osceola County. As in other Disney projects, the company wanted certain assurances from the county, specifically ensuring that Disney would be able to maintain maximum flexibility and control in terms of development of the land. Although many critics voiced concerns that Disney would get special treatment, the incentives for the county provided the necessary motivation for officials to expedite the approval of Disney’s proposal. Since the land would be developed from agricultural use into housing, higher Disney tax revenue would be flowing into Osceola County as well as the revenue associated with new jobs, homes and

\textsuperscript{29} Giroux 38.  
\textsuperscript{30} Lassell 25.
businesses. Disney did receive special concessions in some areas, one of which impacted the later demographics of the town. For all developments in Florida deemed “large enough to have regional impact,” state law mandated building of low cost housing on site or housing funding for low-income families and individuals in a certain proximity to the site.\(^3\) Because county officials wanted the maximum tax revenue, they opted to let Disney keep their upscale housing and instead contribute to the pre-existing county affordable housing program. And rather than paying the requisite $100,000 a year, the county allowed Disney to give a one-time contribution of $300,000. This contribution assured there would be no low-cost housing in or near Celebration, which immediately denied home-ownership to a large segment of people, many of whom were Disney employees.\(^3\) The decision also sent a clear message about the priorities of the county—tax revenue over affordable housing.

Celebration was marketed as a “traditional American town built anew.”\(^3\) The community design is neo-traditionalist, or New Urbanist, a planning movement that aims to reinterpret the architecture and planning of old towns to encourage a sense of community and design opportunities for social interaction. Neo-traditionalist development works to achieve these goals through density of houses on plots as well as an intermingling of housing types, the valuation of public space over private space which brings the town center within walking distance of everyone in town, and control of housing design, landscaping, and decoration of property.\(^3\) Disney determined and articulated from the “philosophical predilections of the planners as well as the perceived

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\(^3\) Frantz 69-76.

\(^3\) Lassell 15.

\(^3\) Frantz 43-44.
heartfelt desires of home buyers” the 5 Cornerstones of Celebration: Health, Education, Technology, Sense of Community and Sense of Place.\textsuperscript{35}

These cornerstones emphasizing community welfare and involvement in addition to the Disney name stamped on the town attracted many residents, all of whom had to be willing to make sacrifices to live in Celebration. As Henry Giroux noted, homeowners who bought into Celebration’s commercial notion of safety, security and community gave up a large degree of control often taken for granted by many homeowners. Decisions as simple as the color of a house and its curtains are subject to strict rules and limitations in Celebration. More important aspects, like the terms of the housing contracts and the costs of living in the town are also strictly controlled by Disney. And although Celebration is designed for maximum community interaction, the people interacting with each other are generally middle class and white.\textsuperscript{36} According to the book Celebration U.S.A., written by a couple who lived in Celebration, many residents of Celebration moved to the town largely because of the Disney brand endorsement, and trust Disney to recreate the kind of town they remembered. Blacks could not be expected to place that kind of faith in Disney, given that the attractions at Disney World and Disneyland pander to a white, middle-class version of America in which issues of race are, at best, skirted and, at worst, stereotypically reinforced.\textsuperscript{37}

The writers go on to point out that many criticisms of neo-traditional communities come from their economic and geographic isolation, however unintentional, which can symbolically close the gates to any open community.

\textsuperscript{35} Lassell 34.  
\textsuperscript{36} Giroux 68-69.  
\textsuperscript{37} Frantz 218.
Conclusion

The spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something added to the real world—not as a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society’s real unreality…It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as a justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. It further ensures the permanent presence of that justification, for it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself.38

The Disney experience and Disney spaces are spectacles on an immense scale. Disney banks on the “already made” choices of their consumers, both figuratively and literally. For Disney, the brand is primary. It emblemizes family values, safety, fun, and innocence. People associate these qualities with Disney and seek out the Disney experience because of these qualities. Thus, no cracks in the veneer can show to compromise the value of the brand, and this is the main reason that Disney seeks to control its experiences and products down to the last detail, whether the product is a theme park souvenir, a superstore in the heart of Times Square or a planned community. Somewhere along the way, Disney’s values have excluded many populations from its global audience, specifically low-income audiences, minority audiences, and audiences who may not conform to Disney’s strict characterization of the ideal as passive spectator and active consumer.

As long as the Disney Company is given special assurances and exemptions to state and local laws and policies, it will remain a constant and constantly growing voice in almost all aspects of American media, culture and land development. Challenging the homogenous Disney voice and raising critical questions about its seemingly impervious power is a way to begin seeing Disney spaces, experiences and products in a more realistic way. Perhaps with a more accessible public critical examination, Disney values will still emblemize an ideal America, but one in which the voices and values of previously marginalized and excluded populations have renewed importance.
Works Cited


