

Practice

Creating a Space in Time

Disney design process reflects vision of its founder

by John Simpson



What do architecture and movie-making have in common?

"The entertainment business is about telling stories, and we do that through architecture," says Bill Dye Jr.,

AIA, director of architecture and environmental design at Walt Disney Imagineering.

Speaking to an audience at the Institute's Washington, D.C., headquarters on February 2, Dye gave an insider's glimpse of the Disney corporation's singular approach to the creation of its buildings, landmarks, and theme parks.

Reverse design process

Turning the traditional concept/schematic/design development process on its head, Disney's "Imagineers"—those responsible for creative development, planning, design, engineering, and management of Disney's theme parks, attractions, and real estate developments—more closely follow the techniques of a set designer, according to Dye. First, a "blue-sky" phase is held, wherein ideas are exchanged, followed

by artists' attempts, through elaborate sketches, to capture the mood of an attraction and the buildings' place within it. A "story line," is then developed, followed by full-scale physical models and finally a usable building.

"It's totally collaborative," Dye says of the Imagineers' approach to developing their ideas, likening the process to making a feature film. The 2,500-strong

Imagineering staff comprises over 100 disciplines—architects chief among them—and integration is key, he adds.

It's a process that the Imagineers have refined continually in the course of developing nine theme parks in the half-century since Walt Disney first assembled the unit to bring his idea for Disneyland to life.

That history is covered in detail in the exhibition "The Architecture of Reassurance: Designing the Disney Theme Parks" (March 17–August 15 at the National Building Museum, Washington, D.C.), the title of which hints at the philosophy and motivation of a man whose architectural and planning ideas are being carried out even 35 years after his death.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL BUILDING MUSEUM

Monorails at Tomorrowland indicate Disney's interest in public transportation options.

"The Architecture of Reassurance"

"Our CEO happens to have a passion for architecture," Dye said of current Disney boss Michael Eisner. "He wants buildings to stand the test of time." It's a passion obviously passed down from Walt Disney himself, who, as illustrated in the exhibition's drawings, plans, and models, relied heavily on architecture to sell his version of postwar utopia.

Starting with Disneyland's "Main Street U.S.A." (drawn from Disney's memory of his hometown of Marceline, Mo.), the park was designed to be "reassuring"—a mix of the familiar and the fantastic—and a pedestrian-friendly reprieve from the Los Angeles sprawl that would soon encroach upon it. Duplicated at all subsequent Disney parks, Main Street buildings use a film-making technique called "forced perspective"—with a near-life-size ground floor and progressively smaller upper floors—that effectively "shrinks" the city to human scale.

Adding to the pedestrian-"friendliness" of the parks are "wienies," Disney-speak for the highly visible architectural landmarks—Fantasyland's castle, Frontierland's riverboat, Tomorrowland's rocketship—that tourists can easily identify to gain their bearings.

The exhibition's "Simulations" gallery shows the Imagineers' facility for recreating locales, displaying drawings and models of such icons (reproduced at Disney World, Orlando) as the Eiffel Tower and the Piazza San Marco. Disney places great emphasis on its precise architectural detailing in these recreations and, in a process they describe as "plussing," attempts to "improve" on the existing construction by adding new buildings to form a convincing context.

Such simulations are now acknowledged to have influenced developers in the creation of urban shopping districts in New York, Boston, and Baltimore. But Disney had still larger plans afoot to shape the future of urban design.

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EPCOT—the city that wasn't

Flush with the success of Disneyland, its founder “wasn’t going to make the same mistake” of building his next park where a sprawling metropolis could impinge on it, Dye noted. So he purchased 27,000 acres in central Florida and succeeded in obtaining for it “sovereign-like” status for the land.

Disney’s ambitious plans for the land, outlined in a film he made shortly before his death in 1966, included a glass-domed and air-conditioned “city of to-



Disney’s Central Hotel also is featured in the National Building Museum’s March 17–August 15 exhibition.



Disney’s Main Street, U.S.A. was based on his memory of his home town, Marceline, Mo.

morning” set amidst a 1,000-acre site. The metropolis would be laid out like a wheel (not unlike Disneyland and subsequent Disney parks), the hub to contain a hotel and convention center, stores, theaters, restaurants, and office buildings. Encircling the hub would be concentric belts of high-density apartments, greenbelt areas, and low-density residential districts. High-speed monorails would transport commuters to the central city, and “people movers” would move them about within the city.

Disney’s Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT), projected to house 20,000 people, never came to fruition as Disney had envisioned. But its mere formulation reveals Disney’s emerging “New Urban” sensibility, as well as his struggle to reconcile the old world with the new.

That ethos did find expression, however, in the Disney-built town of Celebration, Fla.—opened in 1996 on 4,900 acres near Orlando—which bills itself as combining “the best ideas from the most successful towns of yesterday and the technology of the new millennium.” Gone are Disney’s dome, the monorail, and the high-rises. But preserved from his origi-

nal vision are the emphases on safety, walkability, and “community.” The town’s pre-1940s residential architectural styles (residents may choose from one of six styles offered) also echo Disney’s yearning to recreate an earlier era.

Into the future

Today’s Disney corporation—the undisputed leader in its chosen idioms—continues to exhibit the curious wedding of old and new characteristic of its founder.

According to Dye, the Imagineers have pioneered a four-dimensional software program, which they plan to market, that adds the element of time to the construction process. The program—used in the design of several of the rides in Disney’s newly opened California Adventure—is intended to keep “unpredictability” out of the design process, which he says can constitute 50 percent of a project’s “hard cost.”

Nevertheless, Dye is quick to add, “we find that, right now, computer skills are no substitute for good, hard drawing skills,” which he says better bring out the “emotion” of a building. “The storytelling process,” Dye adds by way of descriptive amplification, “is emotional.” 