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Invented places

Jan Sircus

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“Minas Tirith was such that it was built on seven levels, and delved into the hill, and about each was set a wall, and in each wall was a gate. But the gates were not set in a line... so that the paved way that climbed towards the Citadel turned first this way and then that across the face of the hill.”

“... the floor was paved with stones of many hues; branching runes and strange devices intertwined beneath their feet. They saw now that the pillars were richly carved, gleaming dully with gold and half-seen colours. Many woven cloths were hung upon the walls, and over their wide spaces marched figures of ancient legend....” (*The Lord of the Rings* – J.R.R. Tolkien)

In our minds we climb the curving path, up towards the Citadel of Minas Tirith. In our minds we enter the Great Hall of runes and carved pillars. In our minds these places unfold, step by step, image by image, in a richly portrayed sequence of experiences. Places spawned by the imagination of J.R.R. Tolkien. Invented places.

Invented places spring from the creative minds of author, artist or architect. Often pure fantasy, they are the ‘other worlds’ of Oz, Star Wars, Dynotopia, and Myst. Yet their inspiration is the world we inhabit. Authors and artists freely borrow from the crafts, technology and architecture of ancient civilisations, recent history, and contemporary society. They blend cultures and imagery creating new, credible visions of place, as in the stories of Jules Verne and George Lucas, the movies *Bladerunner*, or *Dune*, and the architecture of Arcosanti and Las Vegas.

Common to the most successful invented places are ‘theme’ and ‘story’. The theme is the overriding ‘big idea’ (such as ‘The Movies’ in Universal Studios’ theme park) gluing together the story or stories being told. The theme establishes the context. The story provides the content.

An invented place may be themed as an authentic or symbolic recreation of a past time and place; its

sights and sounds, its colour and texture. For example, the Ancient Rome of the movie *Gladiator*, or Prince Charles’s ‘Thomas Hardy style’ rural town of Poundbury, or a totally magical fantasy like Barry’s Never Never Land in *Peter Pan*. While we stay in each story, while we ‘suspend disbelief’, it all works. When the reader or viewer is jarred by contradiction or distraction, the world falls apart; the place loses credibility, or at best becomes confusing and even chaotic. Successful places stay in one story at a time.

In the real world, Disneyland is the quintessential invented place. It creates reality out of fantasy in ways that are often symbolic and subliminal; digging deep down into the user’s psyche, connecting with cross-cultural archetypal images and multi-generational, hard-wired memories. It is successful because it adheres to certain principles of sequential experience and storytelling, creating an appropriate and meaningful sense of place in which both activities and memories are individual and shared. Disneyland provides ‘safe’ adventures in a ‘safe’ environment, reaffirming our ability to survive and grow in a world of risks and conflict.

Many interpretations of place might not work for the cultural élite, who demand authenticity, but most places, real or invented, have a pop-culture audience.