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# Learning from Disney World

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[1995]

Disneyland and Disney World are two of the most significant public spaces of the late 20th century. They transcend ethnic, class, and regional identities to offer a national public culture based on aestheticizing differences and controlling fear. The Disney Company is an innovator of global dimensions in the symbolic economy of technology and entertainment; it also exerts enormous influence on the symbolic economy of place in Anaheim and Orlando. The world of Disney is inescapable. It is the alter ego and the collective fantasy of American society, the source of many of our myths and our self-esteem.

Learning from Disney World is a humbling experience, for it upsets many of the assumptions and values on which a critical understanding of modern society is based. Not least is the assumption that production, rather than culture, is the motor driving the economy. Yet the entertainment provided at Disney World relies on an extensive work force and an expansive network of material resources. These in turn feed the urban development of the surrounding towns and counties, establishing an image of regional growth that attracts more jobs, more migrants, and more houses. Disney World itself has become a base for attempting synergy with other areas of a service economy. Given the planning capacity of Disney managers and employees, would a Disney Medical Center be out of line? There is, already, a Walt Disney Cancer Institute at Florida Hospital in Orlando, but building a hospital on the grounds of Disney World itself would not be inconceivable.

People have also learned they can derive social benefits from visual coherence. The landscape of Disney World creates a public culture of civility and security that recalls a world long left behind. There are no guns here, no homeless people, no illegal drink or drugs. Without installing a visibly repressive

political authority, Disney World imposes order on unruly, heterogeneous populations – tourist hordes and the work force that caters to them – and makes them grateful to be there, waiting for a ride. Learning from Disney World promises to make social diversity less threatening and public space more secure.

For many years, critics have dissected the public culture that Disneyland and Disney World embody. In the early 1960s, before civility became an issue, the architect Charles Moore (1965, 65) wrote that Disneyland offers “the kind of participation without embarrassment” that Americans want in a public space. People want to watch and be watched, to stroll through a highly choreographed sequence of collective experiences, to respond emotionally with no risk that something will go wrong. Although Moore praised Disneyland for creating a coherent public space in “the featureless private floating world of southern California,” he anticipated the harsher criticisms of European intellectuals, who have tended to write about Disney World since it opened, in 1971, as a simulation of history for people who prefer fakes because they *appear* more sincere (Eco 1986 [1975]; Baudrillard 1986). Disney World works because it abstracts both the technical and architectural elements of a place and the emotions that places evoke. “The more openly fake the buildings are, the more comfortable we are with them” (Goldberger 1992b).

By contrast, North American intellectuals criticize Disney World because it is not “hyperreal,” but too real. Between 1982, when EPCOT (the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow) opened, and 1985, when the new corporate management of the Disney Company revitalized the theme park by commissioning new rides and planning new hotels, Disney World began to be understood as a powerful visual and spatial reorganization