History After Disney: 
The Significance of 
“Imagineered” Historical Places

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The recent confrontation between the Walt Disney Company and Preserve Historic America (PHA) concerning the proposed construction of Disney's America near Haymarket, Virginia, captured much attention, but has tended to obscure the important role that Disney-inspired theme parks play in history education. Although it was reported that PHA opposed the development solely on the grounds that it would compromise the historic integrity of a historic rural Civil War battlefield site, the subject of Disney's portrayal of the past does indeed remain an issue for both public and academic historians. This essay urges that we look more closely and dispassionately at the Disney Parks' role in historical interpretation, for it can tell us much about popular perceptions of history and historic places.

As a historical geographer with a background in public and academic history, the central question that I shall address here is how theme parks interpret the design of historic landscapes they supposedly re-create. In earlier studies, I have noted that shapers of popular culture like Walt Disney (1901–1966) often replicate(d) essences of historic environments (historic architecture and historic landscapes) through a complex process of selection and abstraction of landscape features or elements. Moreover, these elements are often stylized or stereotyped to enhance their effect. Much the same process occurs in the creation of film sets, as the visual aspects of place are essential in conveying the “atmosphere” of both time and place. Knowledge of how this process operates is essential to understanding how public/popular education occurs in environments that are both entertaining and educational—or, as the trade now calls them, places of “edutainment.”

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To illustrate the impact of Walt Disney and theme parks on American culture, I should like to call upon my studies of American "Main Streets" (the downtown commercial districts of small towns). Walt Disney's early years were spent on a prototype Main Street—Kansas Avenue in Marceline, Missouri—where he developed a deep attachment to the small town as his life there contrasted vividly with the privation that the Disney family later experienced in the cities. In 1955, Disney re-created an idealized small town landscape in Disneyland (a theme park embodying visions of history and fantasy, the past and the future) by incorporating selected aspects of historic American townscape design. Disney entitled this creation "Main Street USA" as a seeming renunciation of the small town acid sketches provided by writers like Sinclair Lewis, whose *Main Street* had portrayed small town life with scorn about thirty years earlier. In correspondence with Disney officials in the early 1970s, I learned that Disney created Main Street USA as the entry to the theme park because it would provide a "mood setting" exposure to the familiar; he also created Frontierland as explicit testimony to the power of the frontier experience in shaping America's image of itself. Like most Americans, Disney looked west for adventure, but felt a sense of nostalgia for the middlewest and east; moreover, Disney looked to European history for some of his more imaginative iconic designs and images, such as castles, but also called upon designers like Harper Goff, who used certain buildings in his own boyhood town of Fort Collins, Colorado, for inspiration in creating Main Street, USA.

In a remarkably candid commentary in *American Heritage* magazine almost a decade ago, historian Richard Snow noted that, as a youth of ten, his perceptions of America and the American past were influenced by Walt Disney. Snow called Disney's Main Street USA "a triumph of historical imagination." In my forthcoming book *Main Street Revisited: Time, Space and Image-Building in Small Town America* (University of Iowa Press "American Land and Life Series"), I excerpt the following vivid recollection by Snow:

I was enchanted by all the rides, but the thing that made the strongest impression on me was Main Street, Walt Disney's evocation of the small-town America of his youth. I remember standing there in the dusk while the lights came on. I watched them outlining the busy cornices while a horsecar clopped quietly past, and suddenly I wanted to stay in this place forever.¹

By the time Snow was in his twenties, however, he tells us that he did not remain grateful to Walt Disney for this bequest, but rather became "embarrassed and irritated" by Disney, who was now seen as representing "a sort of institutionalized, self-congratulatory blandness." After considerable soul-searching, Snow relented, and recommended that we, as historians, had

better appreciate Disney. Snow's message has gone largely unheeded, as Disney-bashing remains quite fashionable in our field, but one wonders how many of us as history professionals raised in the 1950s and 1960s would ever dare admit that we were so positively influenced by Disney's version of history that we became historians, that is, elected to "stay in this place" (which is a metaphor for the past) forever? Whether or not Disney influenced a generation of academic and public historians is something that should be further explored, but Disney certainly had a profound effect on the American public's perception of both history and historic places. When studied in this light, Disney emerges as an applied popular historian who stressed the continuity and validity of the past in an era that espoused progress and advocated the erasure of most history from the "real" (or everyday) American landscape. In designing a turn-of-the-century Main Street as the main point of the park's entry, Disney utilized the power of historic association to create a mindset about life at a treasured time (circa 1900) in a treasured place (the generic American small town). By so doing, Disney reaffirmed the town as the nucleus of American values (even today we use the term "Main Street" when we refer to what is really happening at the grassroots level).

Disney also defined the image of small-town design and architecture as visually integrated and carefully orchestrated: he and his designers chose building styles, reduced their scale slightly, painted the buildings in carefully selected colors, and designed signage to ensure that Main Street USA conveyed harmonious ambience from end to end, or, as it were, from the town square to the plaza. Disney also democratized access to this idealized past, creating what has become the most memorable small-town landscape in America (and, for that matter, the world)—an archetype of the American small town at the turn of the century. Architect Paul Goldberger noted that Disney created "a kind of universally true Main Street—it's better than the real Main Street of the turn of the century ever could be." As regards the urban morphology of Main Street USA, Disney and his design team employed a number of important traditional European/American planning designs, among them (1) a linear Main Street to convey a sense of travel/motion, and (2) the positioning of important nodal features, such as the square and plaza (both of which, like William Penn's 1682 plan of the city of Philadelphia, rely on terminations of lines of sight) to convey a sense of enclosure and a reaffirmation of destination. Disneyland's railroad station and Sleeping Beauty's Castle may thus be thought of as significant "public" buildings positioned to become iconographic statements of the power of Euro-American history and romantic/literary imagination, respectively.

Disney's designs are, in two senses, ultimately historical: he and his designers intuitively, and perhaps consciously, borrowed from classical designs in the creation of pedestrian-scaled townscape, but translated them into vernacular form, and thus helped Americans define who they were by depicting where they had been and where they were going, metaphorically speaking. In the process, Disney excerpted, and aggressively edited, the content of history and the design of historic places. Interestingly, Disney utilized history in theming Disneyland, but was an optimist regarding the possibilities of the future and technology, as evidenced in Tomorrowland.

That Disney re-created American history in a semi-mythical form is obvious to those who study the theme park, but one needs to ask how, or why, Walt Disney was so successful in shaping popular American interpretations/appreciations of history and historic places. By re-interpreting iconic and folkloric aspects of history, Disney gained tremendous power/authority as a spokesman for American culture. It is this power that many historians, academic or public in orientation, would readily covet, for the audience is so large and its appetite for history so nearly insatiable. Certainly, public history owes a debt to Disney, who helped popularize history through both the material culture of the theme park(s) and history-based programming that appeared in film and its then relatively new offspring, television.

American/popular culture authority Margaret King has noted that Disney helped Americans see (that is, visualize) their own past—and their own communities, in a totally new light. In this regard, Walt Disney was both an environmental educator and a history educator. Like all history, however, Disney's version was, quite understandably, filtered to conform to a personal and world view.

One could argue that the popular appreciation of American history in the last forty years is, in part, a result of (1) Walt Disney films and television shows such as "The Great Locomotive Chase" and "Davy Crockett," (meaning that the new History Channel also owes a debt to Disney's pioneering efforts) and (2) Disney's creation of three-dimensional sets in which the public could literally interact with, or participate in, that dramatized "living" history. This portrayal was contagious, that is, it diffused rapidly, as Disneyland (and its Florida counterpart Walt Disney World, which opened in 1971) helped inspire other theme parks. Six Flags Over Texas (created under the direction of Disney designer Randall Duell in 1961) and other Six Flags properties from coast to coast, as well as Marriott's Great America, owe much to Disney.

The debt transcends theme parks and now reaches into everyday life. Inasmuch as Disney and his designers mandated that automobiles be left at the periphery (in huge parking lots), and visitors (or "guests," as Disney insisted they be called) actually enter an automobile-free environment possessing a visually controlled designed environment that possessed linear

axes, and nodal points of interaction—not to mention carefully developed ambience, or atmosphere, Disney’s theme parks lie at the root of the American shopping center/mall phenomenon of the last three decades. Disney and his designers were geniuses at creating and re-creating place in its most historic sense: as fundamental, integrated designs utilizing rectilinear, angular, and circular design elements. Architects and urban designers know this, but many historians still refuse to concede it. Disney’s fascination with historical architecture and design may, in fact, lie at the roots of the neotraditional/postmodern architecture movement that has swept the country since the 1970s and left its mark on nearly every new shopping center and urban building, which now sport towers and fairly ornate detailing. Postmodernists and Disney both rely on reinterpretations of scale, texture, and historical theming to “imagineer” (a word coined by Disney’s designers) large, integrated projects. What I am saying is nothing less than that life now imitates art, and that those who think of Disney’s version of history as unreal need to redefine reality in order to understand what is occurring.

An understanding of the process of image-building is essential to interpreting all American landscapes, historic or modern. Considered historically, the argument that Disney and his successors created “false” place-related history in the theme parks is certainly naive. Ponder the following: just how “real” was a pioneer American community in the early 1800s whose town builders laid out the community in the form of a Roman grid, emulated classical Greek architecture for its buildings, and named the new community Athens, Syracuse, or Rome? Studies by historical geographers are revealing that popular culture has been reinterpreting and reshaping environments of “real” American places since at least the early nineteenth century. Joseph Wood’s recent study of the New England Village as an American stereotypical icon (which was re-defined and re-created by the intellectual elite in the nineteenth century as a refuge from urbanization and increasing ethnicity) provides a case in point. Disney’s Main Street USA embodies similar redefinitions and idealizations of the small town on the middle border, but the fact that Disney did it under our very eyes in the relatively recent past makes Disney’s creation seem all the more suspect. Disney, of course, did not operate in a vacuum: his portrayal of the American past also builds on a rich tradition of expositions that have reinterpreted historic places since the early nineteenth century (and in so doing, created new places in America). Viewed in historic context, then, Walt Disney was influenced by many factors—including the lingering historical legacy of the “White City” in Chicago’s Exposition of 1893, the City Beautiful movement of the early twentieth century, an exhibit called Yesterday’s Main Street (sponsored by General Motors) at Chicago’s Museum of Science and

Industry, the early Knott's Berry Farm, and actual historic communities in Europe and America.

Disney's belief in the viability of Main Street probably had a positive impact on even "legitimate" historic preservation activities. Although preservationist William Murtaugh credits British preservation efforts as influencing the successful National Main Street Program begun in the late 1970s by the National Trust for Historic Preservation,\(^6\) we should recall that it also built upon a popular aesthetic sentiment for the small town and team-building techniques pioneered a generation earlier in America by Walt Disney's Main Street USA. Some American towns like Medina, Ohio, are now paradoxically more Victorian in appearance than they were during the Victorian era, in part a result of what some critics call "Disneyfication" of the real small town.

This essay suggests that we view theme parks as a logical outcome of America's very aggressive and creative search for place through image-building, and that we not hold them to the same standards as we do museum exhibits. This does not mean, however, that theme parks cannot be educational; on the contrary, they educate the public in ways far beyond the understanding, or appreciation, of most traditional history educators. Historians can learn from theme park designers (and vice versa), for we both search for ways of identifying major themes, events, and symbols that define our culture. I think it instructive that Disney's America anticipated depicting numerous themes—such as industrial heritage and cultural diversity—that historians currently find so exciting but evidently regard with a sense of ownership.

In summary, the shapers of popular culture, too, share historians' impulse to interpret and present the past, for that impulse is as old as storytelling. Closer working relationships with shapers of popular culture will be established when historians are able to more fully—and more honestly—understand and appreciate Walt Disney's relationship to, and place in, history. Disney certainly was a visionary who helped Americans make the transition from an agrarian/industrial society to a postindustrial future. I would hesitate to call Disney a postmodernist, but if his beliefs and actions were studied more carefully, some might arrive at that conclusion. Disney understood that there were no borders between the personal/ideological and the perceptual/political, and that all education was value-laden. For Disney, image was substance, and whoever controlled that image wielded both the power to affect views of the past and visions of the future.