

# The Architecture of Staged Realities

(re)constructing  
Disney



# Disney, A Real Fairy Story

by Saskia van Stein



As a skilled wizard, Walt Elias Disney (1901–1966) manufactured environments to trick us into believing in his temporary getaways. Through the production of enchanting characters he told fantastical stories, all animated in the sheltered space of the cinema. Later his feel-good universe leapt into reality via his constructed architectural environments and gated communities, all staged realities that blended symbolism and nostalgia while speaking of alternative futures. The man truly was an adventurous genius and his main medium was the American psyche. He understood how to produce a new culture for a nation yearning an identity. He merged a longing for old Europe with a utopian vision, and created the narrative, mastered and innovated the technological medium, and embraced mass media to produce popular culture for the rising middle classes. [...]

## Character building

Back in the 50s, to build Disneyland—*The Happiest Place on Earth*<sup>1</sup>—on the site of a former orange orchard, Walt persuaded the media company ABC to invest in the purchase of 244 hectares of land around Anaheim, California. In return for its investment, Walt appeared in a weekly television programme to tell stories about alternative realities, technological progress, and updating viewers on the process of building the theme park. [...]



Fantasia Resorts, 2018 © Arnau Rovira Vidal

By disseminating stories of wonder, Walt cast his spell of desire out across his future audience. The whole design pulled in visitors who wanted to explore new territories, but who found something oddly familiar upon arrival. Inside Disneyland everything is staged and orchestrated: queuing up,

dumping trash, smells, colours, light, scale, sounds, nothing is left to chance. Carefree leisure is the aim, yet it is all highly controlled and thought out into meticulously routed journeys that guide the audience along the main axes. [...]

### *Inspirations and inventions*

In the era of world fairs and mid-20th century modernity, Walt understood the zeitgeist—American society was looking for a story of progress. To give them that designed identity he took inspiration from the cultural production of the old European continent, its literature and its architecture. Disneyland borrows from the Tivoli Gardens, the amusement park that opened in 1843 in Copenhagen and which Walt visited in 1951, and of course the *Sleeping Beauty* castle bears resemblance to the 19th century Neuschwanstein Castle, built by King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Ever since he was stationed in eastern France as a Red Cross ambulance driver at the end of the First World War, Walt Disney has been collecting throughout his life snippets of inspiration, elements he copied and resampled that resulted in a collage of familiar references. [...]

### *Collaborations with American industry*

The amalgamation of imagination, narration and media, coupled with the embrace of novel technologies led to collaborations with NASA, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and with some pillars of American industry, such as General Motors. These joint ventures paved the way for a mode of living, for a cultural production which trained the public for the same future they would come to inhabit.



*Sleeping Beauty castle, Disneyland, Anaheim, California, 1955*

For example, The Monsanto House of the Future, an attraction exhibited at Disneyland from 1957 to 1967, was a house that boasted how plastic might be used in the home of the future. There were also household appliances such as a microwave, a dishwasher, and a doorbell with a camera—all products that went on to become familiar household items. All the innovations Walt and his team contributed to were showcased in the form of product placements in the pavilions of New York's 1964 World Fair, and later in Disneyland with the ultimate purpose of producing desire.

## *A hypersimplified reality*

However, this is only one side of the story. Disney positions the nuclear white family and its singular kind of identity at the heart of the American Dream. Many of the Disney stories are sugar-coated reinventions of more gruesome coming-of-age, and underdog-comes-good fairy tales. The portrayal of the characters in the animations and movies contribute, unwillingly or not, to racial stereotyping and also enforce gender roles, which in return leads to the normalization of discrimination. The reinforcement of certain gender roles and divisions became apparent as early as the first full feature animation, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). While the Suffragettes were busy marching the American streets fighting for the right to vote during Walt's formative years, Snow White is placed behind the stove. And Walt even laid claim to her voice: he made sure the actress Adriana Caselotti (1916-1997) could not appear—vocally—in other movies ever again. [...]

The under representation or characterization of people of colour further ingrained existing stereotypes.

In the early short entitled *Mickey's Mellerdrammer* (1933), Mickey Mouse portrays blackface thus linking the animation to the tradition of minstrel shows<sup>2</sup>, the cultural production from which animation stems. [...] Also, our relationship to and image of nature has been altered by its portrayal as too pristine.

This is all rather problematic, as we are informed and influenced by the culture we live in and the stories we share. The one-sidedness of both the narratives and the forms of representation and exclusion, hide and thereby suppress the plurality and complexity of day-to-day reality. This is particularly the case now, in our era where the favoured rhetoric of populist political propaganda is oversimplification which, similar to Disney, deploys identification, symbolism, sentimentality or projected innocence to sway audiences into a certain set of ideals that serve to exclude others.

In order to achieve this sense of “wholesomeness”, a set of utopian ideals were mediated through archetypes. In the production of hope and comfort, Disney's cultural fabrications are simultaneously manufacturing nostalgia for the past, as well as for the future. In order to do so, an eclectic multitude of architectural styles such as Gothic

ornaments, 19th century Beaux Arts features, or neoclassical elements are appropriated, mixed and staged to evoke an atmosphere rather than a place. You end up in a place that is neither here nor there. A copy so often copied, we forgot all about its original. This all ultimately leads to an architecture of reassurance.



The Monsanto House of the Future, 1957

## *An immersive experience*

This non-linear weaving with time and place, with real and fiction, with interior and exterior, introduces destabilizing ambiguities that are pivotal to captivating the Disney audience in an immersive experience. [...] Disney took a certain poetic liberty in order to construct a sense of the real. For instance, all the US flags at Disney theme parks are fakes. In fact, they each lack a star or a stripe, which allows them to not be subjected to the regulations that typically apply around flag raising or lowering. [...] Other techniques to skew what we see and perceive as real are at play. One of the most infamous is the “go away green” paint, which the company patented to camouflage and hide what’s in plain sight. The idea being that visitors to the theme park will not notice objects painted a greyish-green shade as they are designed to be overlooked. [...]

Many methods and techniques to conceal or influence what we see draw on filmic methods such as framing, collage, montage and the forced perspective. [...] Other sensorial triggers such as colour, sound, light and scent are being employed to further influence moods and behaviour. [...]

As we temporarily commit to co-produce an imagination, we suspend our belief, escape into worlds of wonder and persuasive architecture while subliminally being informed by the norms and cultural codes of the fictions.



Serris © Eric Tabuchi - Nelly Monnier

## *Disney urbaniste*

[...] In fact, it was Disney’s ambition to harness the park’s success and influence real-world conditions. Walt had started to purchase vast amounts of land outside the theme park with the ambition to build property. His aim was to ‘prototype’ communities of tomorrow by creating vibrant yet controlled urban spaces to counter the crime-ridden inner cities, congested highways, and the ongoing sprawl that dominated the American urban sphere of the 50s and 60s [...]. Could this imply that we need to embrace Disneyfication as much more than a derogatory term? To say something has been Disneyfied most often implies that a ‘real place’ has been stripped of its authentic, historic or sometimes even gritty character. What does it say about us, that our inner cities become the backdrop for speculation, smooth facades and atmospheric spaces? Moreover, what is the long-term influence of social and cultural homogenization where sameness is performed?

## *The new digital frontiers*

The Disney Company has gone on to achieve what Walt was attempting, namely, to establish an all-encompassing universe. With expanding investments into building and intellectual property, with resorts on nearly all continents, the omnipresence of merchandise (produced under very poor labour conditions), the production of games, ocean liner holidays and streaming service Disney+, the company has fully permeated our lives and homes. [...] The Disney Company is acquiring technological start-ups spanning fields from robotic engineering, cinematographic VR, to machine learning, artificial intelligence, and Computer Generated Images (CGI)

So, what can we learn from the success of Walt Disney now that it's time to imagine alternative futures? His work being so much about his belief that imagination is the model for reality. In our era of individualism, fact-free politics, and the blurring of boundaries to sway citizens, an understanding of the cultural codes and an awareness of these developments are paramount.



*An example of the use of Go away green on a hangar in Epcot*



Extract from an article published in issue 78 of DAMN, Spring 2021.

1. This is how Anaheim Disneyland was called by the company when it opened in 1955.
2. The minstrel show was an American show created towards the end of the 1820s, featuring white actors who blackened their faces (blackface) or blacks who were generally portrayed as ignorant, stupid, superstitious, cheerful and gifted in dance and music. They existed until the 1950s, when they disappeared with the rise of the anti-racist movement.

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exhibition  
28 04 ➔ 06 10 2024

inaugural lecture  
28 04 2024, 18:30  
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## arc en rêve centre

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Since 1981 arc en rêve centre d'architecture has elaborated a cultural awareness-building strategy focusing on contemporary architecture and extending into city planning, landscape design, aimed at broadening perceptions of a changing world.

Its internationally recognised programme features exhibitions, lectures, public discussions, publications, workshops for children, seminars for adults, visits to buildings, city tours, and planning experiments

From the first animated films in the 1920s to the latest blockbusters, audiences around the globe have grown up with the standards, values, and models rooted in Disney's stories. Creator of an entertainment empire, encompassing media, film, theme parks while also influencing architecture and urban planning, Walt Disney has imagined fantasy worlds where reality is scripted. What lies behind the seemingly innocent and reassuring universe of familiar characters? What kind of city does the Disney formula give birth to? Although the world of Disney is largely built on nostalgia, it is also the incubator of major cinematographic innovations, urban design principles and technological research.

The exhibition *The Architecture of Staged Realities* looks at Walt Disney's legacy as a mirror of contemporary society and its cultural production, both in terms of identity construction and the architecture this generated.

*The Architecture of Staged Realities, (re)constructing Disney* presents contributions by theorists, architects, artists and other designers like Bas van Beek, Oliver Beer, Persijn Broersen & Margit Lukács, Julien Discrit, Sveta Dorosheva, Carlos Diniz, Benjamin Earl, Pete Ho Ching Fung, Frank O. Gehry Associates, Eléa Godefroy, Sam Jacob, Oskar Johanson, Bertrand Lavier, Clara Lezla, Ateliers Jean Nouvel, Christian de Portzamparc, OMA, Aldo Rossi, Arnau Rovira, Venturi Scott Brown, Pilvi Takala, Bernard Tschumi Architectes, Christoph Sillem, Kem Weber.