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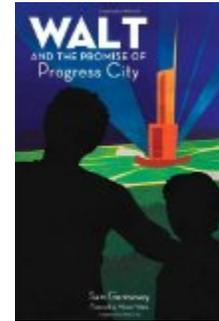
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sam Gennawey. *Walt and the Promise of Progress City*. n.p.: Ayefour Publishing, 2011. 374 pp. paper (\$19.95), ISBN 978-0-615-54024-5.

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## No Mickey Mouse Architect: An Urban Planner's View of Walt Disney's Progress City

For several years in the late 1990s, I taught a course called Issues in Disneyland at the University of California at Irvine. Aimed at budding artists, architects, and urban planners, it was enormously popular, fueling intense competition for a coveted seat, mostly because it required frequent visits to the world's most famous theme park close to the Orange County campus. When I learned that well-respected urban planner, blogger, and self-proclaimed "Disney-nerd," Sam Gennawey, had written *Walt and the Promise of Progress City*, I was eager to read it. I only wish this volume had been available earlier so my Irvine students could have benefited. Packed with provocative ideas that raise important questions about how we should live, it is sure to spark some lively debates.

Like me, Gennawey grew up in Southern California. By mid-century, mousketeers sporting Davy Crockett coonskin caps would be able to visit a kingdom the likes of which the world had never known. It bore the name of their favorite "Uncle Walt," whom they grew to know and love from his appearances hosting a popular television show aimed at America's youth. The original Magic Kingdom, Disneyland, opened in Anaheim on July 17, 1955. Since that hot summer day, visitors from around the globe have flocked to "the happy place" (as it is called on its welcoming plaque). At Disneyland, Gennawey became mesmerized with Tomorrowland's Carousel of Progress, one of the few free attractions that included a 6,900-square-foot model for the *Progress City* of this

book's title.

Gennawey begins his book by claiming that "not only was Walt Disney the most influential entertainment figure of the 20th century; he wanted to become the most influential urban planner of the 21st Century" (p. 23). *Progress City* is largely descriptive, supplemented with the author's opinion based on teachings from the architecture and planning professions, without the balance and analysis typical of an academic textbook, but nonetheless a thought-provoking, readable, and much-needed look from an environmental design perspective at Walter Elias Disney (whom he simply calls "Walt," not to confuse the man with the media empire that bears his name). Opposite in tone from Carl Hiaasen's, *Team Rodent, How Disney Devours the World* (1998), Gennawey's work dwells instead on the spatial "magic" of Walt's physical empire and the planning knowledge the author claims accounts for its enduring appeal, especially Disneyland's. Imagine if Walt had been able to build a city, where folks not only visited and enjoyed the pleasures of diversion, like at Disneyland, but also lived and worked. Walt would tackle this challenge toward the end of his life, producing his ultimate vision, the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, or EPCOT. It was to be a showcase for the American free enterprise system but remained unrealized after his death in December 1966.

Most historians of the built environment have overlooked Walt's contributions to town planning. Gen-

nawey's book thus fills a gap by showing chronologically the evolution of Walt's supposed mastery, leading to his plans for EPCOT and, ultimately, his proposal for resolving Earth's ills. The tale is not about a storyteller and great animator who applied motion picture trickery to city building and changed the amusement industry, but about a master builder in his own right. Perhaps, as the author suggests, Walt had a higher calling, motivated by the challenge of finding solutions to the "problems of our cities" (p. 223). Gennawey starts this history with a description of the layout at the Disney studio built on fifty-one acres in Burbank in the late 1930s, the first to be dedicated to the manufacture of animated films. Supposedly, Walt designed it to foster human creativity and productivity, building a berm around the studio's perimeter to limit connection to the surrounding city, which helped focus his workers' attention. Gennawey goes on to detail the evolution of Walt's five-acre homestead in a wealthy district of West Los Angeles around which he eventually built a berm to shield his view of the neighborhood; the berm also protected his half-mile-long model railway line, complete with steam engine. Walt's well-known passion for trains and collecting and building miniatures coupled with his entrepreneurial spirit led to his idea for a traveling Disneylandia project, a precursor for his design for Disneyland, and later Disney World. The journey through Walt's mission "to educate and entertain" ends with Gennawey's fascinating speculative description of what EPCOT would have been like if it had been realized according to Walt's vision and timeline, opening in 1982 in Orlando, Florida (instead of the Walt Disney World Resort that was actually built), as a "planned, controlled community" for twenty thousand residents. "Who would have guessed," Gennawey writes, "that this love of miniatures and trains would lead to a utopian world that was shielded from the surrounding urban sprawl, where everything functioned as planned, everything was spotless, and people immediately felt at home?" (p. 99). Clues were in how Walt built his home and workplace.

To support his argument that Walt was a utopian builder, Gennawey explains how Disneyland's design is based on an underlying and somewhat controversial architectural theory, developed by Christopher Alexander (my former UC Berkeley architecture professor, now emeritus). Although applying Alexander's scheme to Disneyland is an intellectual stretch, the approach is worth considering. In *A Pattern Language* (1977), Alexander and his collaborators lay the foundation for increasing community participation in design.[1] This foundation meant that aspects of new buildings or places, when

constructed utilizing his process and agreed-upon spatial rules, called "patterns," would both resonate with the majority of human beings and improve the quality of the surrounding environment, contributing to what Alexander called a "timeless way of building." These supposedly universal environmental truisms, when combined, would create lively places, large and small. According to Gennawey, Walt intuitively employed these patterns in Disneyland's design, which he claims accounts for its success. I would argue, however, that some of the most basic patterns were never used at Disneyland because they simply would not have worked. For example, Alexander's "Four Story Limit" would have prohibited the construction of Sleeping Beauty's Castle, the logo for the park itself. Another counterexample, the Blue Bayou restaurant, sits inside a giant barn and features a manufactured foggy sky filled with faux fireflies that contribute to the illusion of a balmy evening in the Old South. The simulated environment is devoid of the natural light required in one of Alexander's key patterns, called "Light on Two Sides."

Students of the built environment understand intuitively—like scores of builders throughout history—many of Alexander's patterns. Alexander identified and described them as patterns precisely because they occur repeatedly. Walt designed Disneyland to accommodate human beings in a town-like setting. Thus, some of the patterns found in all human settlements would necessarily be found there. I believe Alexander would shudder at the claim that the Magic Kingdom was the ultimate expression of his Pattern Language. The term "Disneyland" is often used to describe places that are artificial. Alexander understood the difference between real, messy, organic, living places, with multiple layers of ownership and meaning—a spatial tapestry created over time by multitudes of contributors through slow and piecemeal changes—and a set of arbitrary images that claim to represent reality, a copy with no original, like Disneyland.

The Magic Kingdom did not evolve naturally but was created as a single object with a tree-like structure.[2] This makes mental navigation for the designer and physical navigation of the resulting layout for the visitor relatively easy. Disneyland's layout controls visitors' movements, contributing both to their security and surveillance. But what is fundamentally missing from Disneyland—and why it is not and cannot be a city in any sense that Alexander intended—is that it is populated only by visitors, which *Progress City* simply ignores. Disneyland has no resident community of stakeholders

with ownership in its progress that contributes daily to its development and evolution. It is home to no one (except perhaps to Walt once, who built its only apartment for himself over the fire station at the entrance to Main Street). Thus, while its layout provides evidence that Walt understood places for people as well as how they are governed and develop, Disneyland is designed to ignore complicated social problems. What Walt created was a perfect, parallel universe.

Although Walt may have turned his back on city-planning tenets, as a designer he did not ignore the power of stories and the environments needed to support them. In chapter 7, "Disneyland and the Urban Experience," Gennaway acknowledges some of the concepts learned from filmmaking applied to the park's design, especially the visual sleights of hand, visual coherency, and control of the viewshed, which have been explored more thoroughly in many other works. As the world's greatest animator, Walt knew how to imagine and create settings to serve his characters and their stories. His understanding evolved from animation backgrounds to dioramas where train passengers sit passively in their seats to experience different scenes as if they were characters in a cartoon, to a theme park designed around different "lands" where visitors are immersed in three-dimensional, movie-like environments and enter elaborate fun-house attractions, the E-ticket rides. These are essentially high-concept dioramas that take riders on often-bumpy journeys through a story, each with a beginning, middle, and end.

*Progress City* misses the opportunity to broaden consideration of Disneyland's pioneering impact on our communities. In the article "Disneyization of Society," British sociologist Alan Bryman (who also wrote *Disney and His Worlds* [1995]) describes four social trends that have emerged from traits in Disneyland. These include what he calls theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising, and emotional labor.[3] From an environmental design standpoint, the idea of "theming" is perhaps the most important trait that Gennaway mentions in passing. Walt developed his thematic concepts for his Southern California park—the first of its kind and, thus, a true prototype—to differentiate Disneyland from the sleazy, sexually charged environments of traveling shows, such as amusement parks, carnivals, and circuses. He envisioned a place that was spotless, stable, and family friendly (hence a "park") that also appealed to the masses.

What, then, contributes to the visitor's sense of delight? While this question remains largely unanswered

in *Progress City*, I would maintain it is Disneyland's protected and deliberate isolation from the surrounding city and deviation from everyday urban life that enables visitors to forget their woes temporarily. The plaque at the entrance to the Disneyland theme park reads "Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow, and fantasy." This new place, which is all false fronts like a movie set, is for a time accepted as real by the visitor's willing suspension of disbelief. Upon entering, the visitor mentally agrees not to dwell on the trickery (spotless Main Street is rendered in three-quarter scale so everyone feels bigger) or peek backstage (which is filled, by the way, with ugly fluorescent lights, linoleum flooring, and disgruntled workers like at any factory). As a reward, adults, the most frequent park visitors, can experience anew childlike innocence and are free to pretend. They and their offspring can zoom through the heavens, navigate crocodile-infested waters, bobsled around the Matterhorn, soar with Peter Pan over London, and defy death over and over again, each time with a happy ending.

Why did Disneyland become successful from a commercial standpoint? Instead of arguing, as *Progress City* does, that it is because Disneyland is the result of a "timeless way of building," I would offer the opposite: it works precisely because it is not a living city, especially not Los Angeles. Unlike the multi-nodal City of Angels, Disneyland is coherent and easy to understand. It functions as a respite from the city: isolated from its surroundings like a town that is separate from the countryside, with clear walled boundaries, visually consistent, relatively unchanging, physically sanitized, extremely safe, crime-free, and socially predictable with a prescribed and apparent social order. (In its early days of operation, Disneyland staff screened visitors by their appearance to prevent any possibility of discord.) Its rules of conduct are governed by a singular, controlling entity, enabled by an army of employees, called "cast members," who look the part but are also the housekeeping, custodial, security, and hospitality staff, in addition to their regular duties. Disneyland's draw relies partly on its management so visitors are not required to do much thinking and can let down their guards despite the number of strangers they will encounter. Choices in direction are limited by the hub-and-spoke layout so one can become safely lost. In the Magic Kingdom, each spoke of the central hub leads to a new realm, a land that has no connection in architectural style and atmosphere to the others, which also prevents disorientation, keeping folks carefree.

I would also claim that the true genius of Disneyland is not just Walt's design but Buzz Price's recom-

mended siting in Anaheim, which, according to Gennaway, produced a new form of diversion. I would argue further that Disneyland could only have emerged and endured because of timing and its specific, geographic locale with mild weather and easy access to a major emerging metropolis, providing a means to forget World War II. The site was surrounded at the time by a hodgepodge of fields and industrialized auto-dependent sprawl difficult to navigate on foot, thus functionally and aesthetically both unattractive and nonthreatening in terms of competition for discretionary entertainment dollars. The location was ideal, providing a center where none existed. Disneyland was thus the serendipitous result of a perfect cultural storm, which explains in part why other Disney parks are not as successful.

About his historically undervalued design for EPCOT, the ultimate Disney park meant to resolve our urban ills, Walt said that it “will be a planned, controlled community; a showcase for American industry and research, schools, cultural, and educational opportunities” (p. 336). Walt’s vision is akin to a long line of utopian settlements that have characterized America’s history of community development. I would argue that while building on a utopian tradition, EPCOT is really just an elaborate, futuristic-looking form of company town, designed as a streamlined, efficient machine to be self-sufficient.[4] According to Gennaway, Walt believed that “the physical setting can impact people’s behavior” (p. 293). I would also offer that Walt’s scheme for EPCOT is a reflection of his own values, including his belief in capitalism; his demonstrated predilection for medieval-like walled compounds with controlled ingress and egress via a radial design; his passion for technology, particularly high-speed trains like the monorail system (PeopleMover) and shared electric carts he proposed for mobility; and his romantic passion for high-density old European city centers—especially Paris—teeming with life and culture where walking is the main mode of transport and delight, separated by a greenbelt (borrowed from Ebenezer Howard) to protect single-family residential neighborhoods at the urban edge.

The most Disneyland-like aspect of the EPCOT vision, however, is not its form but its system of governance. I contend that Disney’s EPCOT seems similar in terms of human rights to communist new towns, despite Walt being politically an ultraconservative who willingly

testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee during the Cold War. “There will be no slums,” Walt said, “because we won’t let them develop. There will be no landowners therefore no voting control. People will rent houses instead of buying them, at modest rentals.... There will be no retirees, because everyone must be employed according to their ability. One of our requirements is that people who live in EPCOT must keep it alive. Everyone who lives here will have a responsibility to help keep the community an exciting living blueprint of the future” (p. 336). These rules he made were not derived democratically. If EPCOT is the grand plan, Gennaway asks us to ponder, what indeed would life be like in Walt’s Progress City? Without the right to self-determination, I wonder if it would indeed be the happiest place on Earth.

#### Notes

[1]. *A Pattern of Language* is the second volume of a single work that begins with Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), and produced the 1987 sequel, Christopher Alexander, et al., *A New Theory of Urban Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[2]. For further discussion of the structure of cities and the complicated problems associated with urban life, see Christopher Alexander’s seminal article, “A City Is Not A Tree,” *Design*, no. 206 (1966), <http://www.mendeley.com/research/city-not-tree/>; Jane Jacobs, “The Kind of Problem a City Is,” in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 428-448; and Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin W. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155-169.

[3]. Alan Bryman, “The Disneyization of Society,” *The Sociological Review* 47, no. 1 (February 1999): 25-47.

[4]. For more discussion on company towns, see especially Oliver J. Dinius and Angela Vergara, eds., *Company Towns in the Americas: Landscape, Power, and Working-Class Communities* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Margaret Crawford, *Building the Workman’s Paradise: The Design of American Company Towns* (New York: Verso, 1996); and Hardy Green, *The Company Town: Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills That Shaped the American Economy* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

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