DISNEYLAND AND DISNEY WORLD:
Constructing the environment, designing the visitor experience.

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Disneyland and Walt Disney World are two of the best known and most highly visited recreation locations in the world. With this visibility and audience reach, the action of the Disney Company extends well beyond the boundaries of their theme parks. Not only is Disney a multi-dimensional entertainment conglomerate, but its profile gives it prominence that no other recreation manager has. Anything conducted at Disney has the potential to flow on to other locations. That is, the standards that Disney sets in the management of its park environments have the potential to become the standards against which all environments are judged. Similarly, the visitor expectations and experiences that Disney constructs can become models to which visitors would have all recreation managers aspire. Disney is often acknowledged as the premier visitor services organization, and it is partly this excellence that gives them stature and impact.

Everything Disney does is tailored to the visitor’s needs. The corporation’s success, and the success of their theme parks, is strongly attributed to their ability to continually meet and exceed visitors’ expectations. Customer satisfaction is a number one concern, as the goal of repeat business and extended patronage is clearly evident in all operations. A notable attention to details and a constant investment in anything that affects the guests’ experience puts Disney apart from their competitors. This then sets higher standards for all providers. As Connellan (1996) suggests, "Your competition is anyone who raises customer expectations — because if someone else satisfies customers better than you, no matter what type of business, you suffer by comparison" (p. 20). Recreation resource managers, then, can find themselves compared to the success of Disney’s approach. Disney World and Disneyland may be nearer to what people want than anything given them before. The more that managers publicly aspire to be meeting those expectations, the more the public will apply the standards they know of from Disney.

Disneyland and Disney World are prime examples of a completely constructed environment, and a fundamentally prescribed visitor experience. It is this that could be problematic for land managers. If visitors use Disney as the norm, as the standard of how things should be, then they will expect our natural resources to be similarly constructed. If the natural environment doesn’t conform to those standards then there will be expectations to reconstruct nature to fit. It is doubly concerning that Disney may become what people expect things to be. That is, Disney’s construction of nature becomes more real, more authentic, than nature itself. As Johnson (1981) explains, "these Disney
creations are themselves becoming symbols and experiences that Americans can hold in common; they serve as a great shared experience" (p. 163).

But, Disney is not without its own baggage. As a consumer-driven location it is frequently beholden to the lowest common denominator. Disney strives to cater to the most number of people without being offensive or threatening. Disney is "about mild contentment and the over arching reassurance that there is an order governing the disposition of things" (Marling, 1997, p. 83). That is, rather than striving to maintain uniqueness, there is something vaguely reassuring and familiar about all of Disney’s environments and experiences.

Perhaps the most obvious of Disney’s agendas is its alliance to Hollywood. Disneyland and Disney World are performances, with every detail controlled for entertainment effect. The builders never hesitated to distort nature if they could make it more aesthetic and entertaining (Tuan, 1997). Even the business enterprise of Disney is carefully controlled. Disney is not to be sullied by it’s association as a capitalist enterprise. The fantasy is weakened if the company is perceived as profit-making, and so the image of the corporation is very tightly controlled.

Other aspects of the Disney agenda that are not immediately apparent include the prioritizing of the romantic over the realistic; the culture of consumption that infuses nearly every aspect of the theme park experience; and the essential defensiveness and concern for safety that has grown up in Disney’s prodigious and ferocious legal department. It is to these and other elements of the Disney approach to which this paper now turns, raising the fundamental question of what are the standards to which the management of real natural environments will be held, as Disney’s approach becomes more dominant. Driven more and more by a consumer-based model of land management, Disney, as the expert of providing for public expectation, provides a window of the possible future for natural resource professionals.

- The Happiest, Most Harmonious Place on Earth

Disney, as befits the ultimate fantasy world, is an exercise in complete programmed harmony. It represents the logical conclusion of human control of nature. In Disney it would appear that everything is in its place and that there is a place for everything. But it should be remembered that everything is done for effect and not as a reconstruction of a naturally, functioning place. Disneyland is an environment in which architecture, landscaping, characters, food, merchandise and the costumes the employees all blend together in one harmonious whole (Bright, 1987). Visually and aesthetically everything flows together. Never mind that the selection of plants, buildings and other signifying objects are casually plucked out of context and reassembled in impossible, but coherent totalities (Bryman, 1995). All that matters is that it feels perfectly natural, as long as you could almost believe like you’re somewhere else (Connellan, 1996).
Disney aims to construct a world apart. They ask of the visitor to suspend belief and enter into a land far away from the reality of the world outside its gates. It is as though Disney wants us to see only the world how it should be. This is the better, brighter side of life where people and place seem naturally and harmoniously co-existent. Such programmed and experienced optimism is comfortable and psychologically reassuring, thus allowing even greater temptation and desire to become immersed in the experience. For these reasons you cannot see or hear the outside world from within Disney. A high earthen wall, combined with a city ordinance banning high rises, ensures a clear line of sight.

And much is made of the entrance into the theme park. It is clear that a new world awaits those who pass through the gates. It is deliberately difficult to leave and return to the theme park in any one day. The visitor is made to leave behind the outside world and find ways to have their needs met only within. Much as in wilderness experience, there is required a certain self-reliance and independence. Beyond the gates a new environment must be embraced and skills specific to that place learned and acquired.

But this place is a nature of a very special kind: "not an ecosystem, but an ego-system one viewed through a self-referential human lens — anthropomorphized, sentimentalized, and moralized" (King, 1996, p. 60). For example, nothing dies in Disney. There is an ever present youthfulness in the animals, and in the employees. Aging and/or diseased plants are removed when the park is closed, and extensive chemical treatments are used to minimize the numbers of bugs, predators and weeds. Growth retardants are used to keep plants within their designated place. Nature is constantly cajoled to "behave" itself (Wilson, 1992). Other hormones induce flowering out of season to ensure color and vibrance even in fall and winter. The visual monotony of real jungles is broken by interspersed species from other ecosystems. Thus, this harmonious location that is so very attractive to the visitor, can be seen to be a very incomplete view of nature.

However, perhaps more troubling are the expectations that this can then create in the visitors’ mind. Because the construction and experience of nature is so well done at Disney it is difficult for some not to expect the ‘real’ world to also be this way. Indeed, it is not surprising that this creates a level of dissatisfaction with the ‘real’ world. As King (1996) suggests, "There is a strong presumption that Disney closely records the real thing out there in mountain meadow, prairie and pound. If our first introduction to the natural world is via ‘Disneyvision’ -- and for virtually all of us, it is -- then we cannot help being disappointed by the real thing. Documentary is a dramatic form. Nature is hard put to compete with art" (p. 63). For example, there can be disappointment that wild animals outside the theme park are not immediately accessible, exciting, friendly and safe (Tuan, 1997).

Disney is renowned for its cleanliness. As CEO Michael Eisner is once quoted as saying, "I stepped from the chill and gloom of an Easter winter into the sunny glow of Main street, a place so clean that it seemed you could eat right off the sidewalk" (Bright, 1987, p. 17). Every inch of counter, floor, wall and window is constantly cleaned. The streets are scoured nightly with high-powered steam jets, and many of the high traffic areas are touched up each night with new paint, grass and soil.
However, within this cleanliness lies a sanitized and unrealistic view of the world. In Disney there is no sign of decay, crime, confusion, discontent, pain, poverty, or struggle (Van Mannen, 1992). There is no sign of the blood, sweat and sacrifice that was required to construct the world (Rapping, 1995). Not only is evidence of work hidden, employees are coached to appear as though their work is play. Evidence of the impact of high levels of visitation upon employees, and upon the location, is carefully hidden. Indeed, every attempt is made to hide the human hand of maintenance. For example, the vast infrastructure of service tunnels, employee changing rooms, trash removal viaducts and food preparation rooms is hidden underground. The impression created is one where there is no mess, no waste, and little labor involved.

Much of the maintenance and re-construction is deliberately carried on outside of park hours. Visitors become passive consumers, neither actively engaged in the construction of their experience, nor particularly aware of the high degree of manipulation and influx of capital required to maintain the experience. Nature may be relentlessly evoked at Disney, but it is not always apparent that it is a nature that has been reworked and transformed (Wilson, 1992). Because the constructed version of nature is so satisfactory, there is little motivation to look for, or notice, the hidden hand of the human designer.

The Hollywood View of the World

Disney’s manipulation of environment and experience is heavily influenced by its Hollywood heritage. The level of technological control, the suspension of belief, and the use of linear narratives are all familiar tools of the film and television industry from which Disney evolved. But, this tradition also includes an approach that wanted to ‘improve’ upon the natural and cultural heritage it was appropriating for entertainment purposes. "The Disney approach is that of a packaged tour where the packaging is the message — how things are packaged take emotional and intellectual precedence over the actual content" (Johnson, 1981, p. 163). The hidden manipulations have proven fertile ground for analysis of the agendas, assumptions, and moral stances of the Disney corporation. These values, too, become the norm of how things should be.

One of the more visible manipulations is that of visual perspectives. These techniques allow Disney to improve upon natural optics. For example, ninety degree corners are less prevalent on Main Street sidewalks. Instead, intersections and building edges are more rounded. These are perceived as less rigid, less threatening, and therefore more conducive to a comfortable visitor experience (Koenig, 1994). Another well known technique, commonly used in film set design, is that of forced perspectives: whereby tall objects are scaled down so as to not be as over-powering. Along Main Street the first floor is $9/10$ of the scale of original, the second floor $7/8$, and the third floor $5/8$ of the original. Similarly, the many castles, the steam train, and the riverboat are all smaller versions of the original. Even the trees on the side of the ‘Matterhorn’ are progressively stunted the further up the mountain they are planted. As with any theatrical exaggeration, if done well, the visitor will readily accept the manipulation as ‘natural’. Bright (1987) points out a similar effect on the ride system where "you only have a few seconds to say something about a figure through your art. So, we exaggerate their features, especially the facial
features, so they can be quickly and easily understood from a distance. ...We try to provide the illusion of life" (p. 195). The speed at which you travel through a scene, as in many Hollywood films, reduces the very likelihood the visitor will question the reality presented. (Bryman, 1995).

Disney takes extra effort to please and entertain. The visitor is kept from being bored, from serious introspection, or even from deconstructing the experience. Disney is one of the experts at crowd management. Visual magnets, (‘weinies’ in Disney parlance), such as castles, are seen at the end of each thoroughfare to draw you on. Disney characters serve as a similar, mobile attractant to help disperse crowds. Negative reinforcement is utilized to keep people on track, as Nigro (1997) explains:

The pretty landscaped roads with good signage welcomes guests, but a wrong turn onto service roads and there’s a subtle shift — plain vegetation, no signs, turnaround areas. You get the idea you’re not supposed to be here, but in keeping with the friendly atmosphere there are no signs that shout ‘Keep Out’. (p. 95)

Further probing by the visitor will inevitably bring on an encounter with a costumed, security guard to guide the visitor back onto the prescribed path.

Disney is more than just an example of physical control, it is also an exercise of moral regulation. "Disney culture presents the particular and historical form of white, capitalist society as the essential society of reason" (Rojek, 1993, p. 22). Disney is a reflection of middle-American attitudes and values, a strictly defined sense of normalcy. It’s a powerful cultural brew, a "smooth blend of sentimental modernism, sentimental populism, nostalgia, consumerism, family virtue and corporate abundance —an intoxicating experience for the millions of Americans who passed through its gates" (Watts, 1997, p. 396).

Nostalgia plays a dominant role throughout the Disney experience. Most visitors seem to embrace the park’s utopian vision of the past and the future. Everything is vaguely familiar, with many cultural icons to trigger the common heritage and myths of America. The stories told in and by the park are attractive versions of familiar tales and events, sometimes exaggerated to the point of parody (Van Manaan, 1992). Disney represents a return to the romantic familiar. This is not so much an accurate representation of how America once was. Rather, it is a picture of how we would like it to be remembered to have been. As with much of Disney, it is the care and attention to detail that hides the inauthenticity in the story that underpins the presentation. Unfortunately, as Bryman (1995) points out, it is a "view of history with which professional historians are unable to compete in terms of either the mode of presentation or the numbers of people touched by it" (p. 142). There is no way of knowing what’s missing, no way to know which social forms and behaviors have been left out (Willis, 1993). The original location or event struggles in comparison to the manageable, seductive, non-threatening version that Disney provides. It becomes increasingly difficult to repudiate the Disney approach — this is how many of us would wish things to be. Thus "Disneyland is more ‘real’ than
fantasy because it now provides the image, upon which America constructs itself" (Giroux (1995, p. 28). The more we trigger the association with Disney, the more dominant that view becomes.

As part of the moral sanitizing at Disney, visitors are encouraged to feel safe. The undesirable and threatening aspects of society are purged. Not only is dirt, crime and poverty removed, but social deviance is curtailed. Disney does not tolerate drug consumption, unrestricted free speech, gang paraphenalia or behavior, unusual religious practices or open displays of homo- or hetero- sexuality. People are not violent or sexual in Disney, unless that behavior has been incorporated into the officially sanctioned display. For example, the daily parade down Main Street is modeled after the many celebrations of Carnival, but without its fairly blatant sexual undertone. The tranquility of the park is not to be threatened, and Disney maintains the right to ask people to leave if their appearance or behavior might be considered offensive to other guests (Koenig, 1994).

Visitors are led to believe that nothing bad can happen in Disney. Tuan (1997) suggests that "the ultimate source of Disneyland’s sunny exuberance lies in the belief that good triumphs over evil" (p. 198). Perhaps implicit within this is the notion that as long as humans control and corral nature, then all will be right in the world. Snakes don’t drop from the tropical trees in Disney, and nor should they. "That’s not a real crocodile, folks. But one whose sole purpose in pseudo-life is to entertain." (Marling, 1997, p. 111) In Disney it is the humans, not nature, who can be all that they can be.

The physical and social safety of Disney allows visitors to expand and experiment with experience and behavior. Visitors are often polite, patient and more willing to interact with strangers. Bright (1987) suggests that,

unlike in society’s modern cities, they can drop their defenses in Disneyland and look other people in the eye. Actually, what we’re selling throughout the park is reassurance. We offer adventures in which you survive a kind of personal challenge — a charging hippo, a runaway mine train, a wicked with, an out-of-control bobsled. But in every case, we let you win. We let your survival instincts triumph over adversity. (p. 237)

Disney, through the intimacy and hospitality of its constructed nature fosters the sense of physical and psychic control. (King, 1996).

But, take away the fear of consequences and people let their guards down. Disneyland, for example, is a pickpocket’s delight. Visitors find themselves doing things they would otherwise never consider. Disney has many accidents and incidents, and often people feel embarrassed and very apologetic upon finding themselves involved with injury. If people do not have to deal with the realities of nature and society, then it is unlikely they will develop care and respect for them. If people stop taking responsibility for their own actions, it is unlikely they will take responsibility for the environment in which the experience can happen. As with many recreation management situations, the more the
visitor perceives the manager to be controlling things, the more they expect nature to be under the manager’s control and responsibility. The duty of care has shifted, and the visitor increasingly becomes the passive consumer. Disney encourages "the consumer to relate to America as a spectacle rather than on object of citizenship" (Rojek, 1993, p. 130).

**Disney — The Universal, Commercialized Place**

In Disney’s theme parks, intimacy, imagination and spontaneity are replaced by the expertise of the well-placed park attendants, the picture perfect photo sites, and the endless spectacles in which fun becomes consumption and memory is reduced to the purchase of souvenirs" (Giroux, 1994, p. 88).

Disney, as with many private recreation and entertainment locations, embraces a commercial objective. Visitors are given every opportunity to purchase Disney goods and services. Willis (1993) suggests that "outside of Disney World, there is no better example than the mall for the wholesale use of architecture and decor as a means for promoting consumption" (p. 121). Most buildings at Disney World look and function like shopping malls (Wilson, 1992). Indeed, the layout and structure of Disney is similar to the mall with its external parking lots, kiosks, food courts and invisible infrastructure such as power lines and other utilities. The mall, of course, is familiar enough that its presence in a recreation location is not questioned. The Disney experience seems incomplete without purchasing meals in Disney restaurants, adorning one’s friends and family in Disney paraphernalia, and, perhaps, sleeping at a Disney hotel. Being caught up in the whole experience, embracing the norm of consumption, the visitor is less likely to show restraint in spending money on non-essential items. Everything is targeted towards the visitor as a customer, a consumer.

However, along with this emphasis on commercialism comes a shift in the meaning of place. Disney along with many shopping malls, embrace function over form. They are becoming universal place-less place. "It is at once every place and no place — it is on the land, but not of it" (Wilson, 1993, p. 161). Locations are familiar and comfortable, exotic yet homogenized to a commonly accepted standard. Local symbolism is used only to flavor the otherwise universal product. Different cultures are incorporated into a slightly more global whole. Local production-based meanings are given over to universally recognized consumption-based meanings. That is, the meaning of many places in Disney is tightly married to, and therefore accessible through, consumption.

It is, however, not a free market place. Rather "all products and all services in the park are controlled, so that the visitor has no option but to buy only what the corporation offers" (Johnson, 1981, p. 161). Indeed, the omnipresent multinational corporation (such as Kodak, Coke, etc.) is celebrated throughout Disney. Many exhibits in EPCOT, Disney World’s futuristic theme park, are not only sponsored by corporations, but celebrate the aptitude and contribution of these corporations to modern life. Disneyland became a showcase for thriving corporate capital, and the consumer paradise that it has
underwritten (Watts, 1997). It has turned the theme parks into a form of walk-through advertising. Davis (1996) describes Disney as the ultimate "integration of recreation and leisure with hyper-consumption advertising and public relations" (p.417).

The Upshot

Disney’s natural and social environments are popular and in high demand. For some visitors, Disney constructs nature and recreational experiences better than can be found in the wild. But, it is a peculiar and particular construction that Disney represents. Disney is harmonious and deliberately distorts our perceptions and perspectives, but with the hand of human control hidden. It is perhaps concerning that visitors might adopt Disney as the model of normalcy without being aware of the degree of human manipulation producing that effect. Disney is clean, safe and psychologically comfortable. However, the burden of care is clearly shifted toward the manager of these environments away from personal and societal responsibility. Disney is Hollywood-ized, catering to the least offensive common denominator. However, the sanitized, romantically familiar is a powerful version that is perhaps more attractive than the original location or event. It is the Disney version that seems more perfect, more possible and more appropriate. But, part of that attractiveness is the loss of local-based narratives to the commercialized, universal whole.

Disney does things well. Indeed, they set many of the standards of customer satisfaction. Therefore, the more that natural resource managers adopt a consumer-driven approach, the more the standards of Disney will be the ones to which they are held accountable. The more that the visitor to a recreation resource is treated as a client, the higher the expectations will be. Never mind that federal and state resource managers and the public estates they manage never could, nor should, be able to meet those standards. Once the script of the visitor as a consumer is triggered, it is hard not to expect the visitor to want more for their purchase. The challenge for natural resource managers is to balance catering to those demands with explicit consideration for what is lost in so doing. After all, the visitor may be less willing and able to distinguish the image of reality from the reality itself.

For example, how appropriate are Disney’s standards of safety, cleanliness and harmony for natural resource managers? How willing should resource managers be to cater to universalized, commercial demands? There should be concern at the increasing use of manipulated environments and social experiences without full and open consideration of the values and objectives behind the constructions. The very uniqueness and public domain of our wildland resources, and the recreational opportunities they offer, are at threat.

Bibliography


