Walt Disney and the Quest for Community

Steve Mannheim
WALT DISNEY AND THE QUEST FOR COMMUNITY
For my grandparents,
Selma and Sid Mannheim
Walt Disney
and the Quest for Community

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ASHGATE
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Preface

Entertainment industry pioneer Walter Elias ‘Walt’ Disney (1901–66) was listed by *Time* magazine as one of the twenty innovators who changed the world during the twentieth century. In the final months of his life, Disney was preparing to build his most ambitious project yet, the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT), in central Florida.

Disney’s EPCOT concept combined company town, visitor attraction, and experimental laboratory. Unlike utopian communities, EPCOT was not advertised as the perfect solution to the urban crisis of the 1960s but instead would be in a continuous state of technological ‘becoming,’ drawing upon the best minds of American industry, government, research institutes, and academia. Its model urban form was a clear reaction to suburban sprawl and the diminished significance of downtowns.

Research for this book began when, in the late 1980s, a friend in the construction industry informed me that Disney had originally conceived of a different project to be built where the 1982 Epcot Center theme park now stands. It was to be a city of tomorrow. I read Bob Thomas’ biography of Disney and began to piece together the missing parts of the story. At the time, there was very little material available on the subject. Ultimately, I returned to school and with the support of the University of Southern California, this project commenced.

Disney’s EPCOT concept reached across many disciplines and so does this book. Broad in scope, EPCOT cannot be understood through an eye-of-the-needle perspective. The chapters are generally organized to reflect the community development process. Many chapters examine the planning and development experience of the company to identify trends and influences on EPCOT planning. This examination also yields a history of Disney’s real estate activities since his earliest days in the animation business. Certain chapters require a brief explanation. Chapter 1, Physical Planning, the longest chapter, presents a general overview of the EPCOT concept, followed by an analysis of influences from planning history and from Disney’s life. Chapter 3, Architecture and Construction, analyzes concepts for EPCOT buildings as well as other projects Disney supervised. Chapter 4, Site and Technology, deals with the challenging conditions of the Florida property and includes a summary of some of the technological achievements of Disney’s own company. Chapter 6, Economic Analysis and Finance, examines both public and private sources of funds and also covers the EPCOT team’s important tours of the research and development laboratories of the
Space Age. Chapter 9, Operations and Management, draws heavily upon the Disneyland experience to shed light on Disney’s philosophies and policies. Finally, Chapter 10, EPCOT After Disney, explains how the experimental community evolved into projects like Epcot Center and the town of Celebration, Florida.

There are several nomenclature conventions used in the book. Project X and Project Future were early names for Project Florida. Project Florida ultimately became known as Disney World. After Disney’s death, it was changed to Walt Disney World. In addition, Walt Disney Productions became The Walt Disney Company in 1986. These two entities are referred to as the company or the Disney organization for the sake of convenience. Walt Disney Imagineering was known as WED Enterprises prior to 1986. WED was named for its founder, Walter Elias Disney. It should be noted that in Disney’s time, Walt Disney Productions was effectively a family company, not the multinational media and entertainment conglomerate it is today. This makes Disney’s EPCOT concept even more ambitious.

Walt Disney the man is referred to as Disney. The EPCOT acronyms also are interesting. The original concept for the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow is known as EPCOT. WED Enterprises writer Marty Sklar also referred to the concept as ‘Waltopia.’ In 1982, EPCOT Center opened. Eventually, it became known as Epcot. In order not to confuse the theme park with the 1966 community concept, I use Epcot Center when referring to the theme park. On October 27, 1966, Disney filmed his segments of a promotional film about EPCOT and the Florida property. The script is entitled ‘Florida Film’ and that name is used here.

During my research, more than one historian suggested to me that EPCOT was probably a ‘figment of a publicist’s imagination.’ Disney’s company was built on more than marketing and imagination, although these were key ingredients. Disney had selected 1,100 acres of land and a multidisciplinary team of professionals to plan and develop EPCOT. Although the city was never built, the concept evolved. It is a story Disney himself might have chosen for one of his own 1960s fairy tales.
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Introduction

In 1911 there were two little studios doing business, one in Los Angeles, one in Hollywood, in two shabby old barns.

Boyle Workman, The City That Grew, 1935

The idea of building a city of the future where there’s nothing but marsh and cypress might seem crazy, but look at what happened at Disneyland … When we went there, it was nothing but orange groves.

Roy O. Disney, 1967

And David prepared large quantities of iron to make the nails for the doors of the gates and for the clamps, and more bronze than could be weighed; and timbers of cedar logs beyond number.

1 Chron. 22:3, 4

The Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT) was entertainment industry pioneer Walter Elias ‘Walt’ Disney’s (1901–66) final dream. After more than forty years in the entertainment industry, Disney wore the hard hat of a builder. He had acquired experience in the planning and development of various projects, including private residences; advanced motion picture studios; motion picture sets; Disneyland, the world’s first theme park; a redevelopment project in St. Louis, Missouri; four notable 1964–65 New York World’s Fair pavilions; the Mineral King Valley, California, ski resort; the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) campus; and other projects. His development concept at the time of his death would combine company town, visitor attraction, and a device with which to help solve the problems of cities.

In December 1963, Walt Disney Productions released the animated feature, The Sword in the Stone, a story about the young King Arthur. Just a month earlier, another rendition of Camelot had come to a tragic close in Dallas, Texas. Meanwhile, Disney was on a trip back to Los Angeles after inspecting swampland property in central Florida. The property would be the site for Disney’s own final crusade: the quest for community.

During his last filmed appearance on October 27, 1966, he declared that the problems of cities were the most important issues confronting society.
The company, along with potential partners in American industry, the people of Florida, and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), would prepare to develop an experimental community.

Disney’s EPCOT conceptual model included the following features: a radial/organic plan; a 50-acre town center megastructure enclosed by a dome; a regional mall-sized, internationally themed shopping area; a hotel and convention complex of 30 or more stories; office space; a greenbelt; high-density apartments; single-family houses; neighborhood centers; a satellite community; monorail and PeopleMover systems; and underground automobile and truck tunnels. In addition, EPCOT would be closely linked to an industrial park. Drawing upon contemporary practice, historical precedent, and the company’s previous experience, this planning model was designed to address the urban evils that formed what architect Victor Gruen called ‘the Anti-City,’ the Disney villain in this story.3

Perhaps the most visible manifestation of the urban crisis of the 1960s was civil unrest. Heavy smoke rose from the Los Angeles community of Watts, southeast of Disney’s residence, during the summer of 1965. Civil rights demonstrations at the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair, where the company had constructed pavilions, and in other parts of the nation, were hallmarks of this turbulent period in American history. Several important pieces of federal legislation grew out of the civil rights movement at the time, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In addition, in November 1966, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966 (‘Model Cities’). The Act’s purpose was to provide financial and technical assistance to develop ‘new and imaginative proposals’ [emphasis added] and

revitalize large slum and blighted areas; to expand housing, job, and income opportunities; to reduce dependence on welfare payments; to improve educational facilities …; to combat disease and ill health; to reduce … crime and delinquency; to enhance recreational and cultural opportunities; to establish better access between homes and jobs … 4

Congress found and declared ‘that improving the quality of urban life is the most critical domestic problem facing the United States.’5 The Republican Disney and the Democratic Congress and Administration appeared to be on an unusual, common course as the company consulting firm Economics Research Associates (ERA), prepared a presentation outline seeking financial assistance for EPCOT from the newly established HUD.

Disney discussed the philosophy behind the EPCOT concept during his final filmed appearance in 1966. The following points summarize the core philosophy: showcase the development, utilize and test new materials and ideas from American industry, find solutions to urban problems, EPCOT would be in a state of becoming, focus on the needs and happiness of residents, and generate demand for new technologies.6 Disney’s faith in
technological progress based on the free enterprise system was never more evident.

In this role, Disney would help focus his peers in American industry on the urban crisis as he searched for prototype products to use in the experimental community. Walt Disney Productions had a long record of technological innovation of its own in the entertainment industry. In addition, the company had established close relationships with a wide range of American industries. Disney and his team would build upon those relationships to seek financial participation and the latest in technology from the research and development laboratories of America’s Space Age.

As previously noted, EPCOT would be in a constant state of becoming, as Disney’s generation had seen the pace of technological change accelerate. This technological change was reflected at Disneyland, where initially futuristic attractions, such as the Monsanto House of the Future, were being retired as relics of the past. Unlike film production, Disneyland enabled Disney to alter his creations from time to time. He once reflected that ‘Disneyland is like a piece of clay, if there is something I don’t like, I’m not stuck with it. I can reshape and revamp.’ With its 20,000 residents, EPCOT would be more organic and less pliable than the theme park. Disney would be faced with a new problem: how to achieve the goals of an ordered, experimental community while maintaining something he was passionate about – the rights of the individual.

At this time, WED Enterprises was advancing technology for use outside the studio and theme park. During the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair, Disney’s Imagineers made strides in research and development for mass transportation and utilized aerospace technology for the robotics known as Audio-Animatronics. In addition, participation in the fair enabled the Disney organization to establish and/or solidify relationships with other corporations. These included Ford Motor Company and Thomas Edison’s company, General Electric.

While King Arthur’s Carousel revolved at Disneyland, General Electric’s Progressland carousel took World’s Fair visitors on a technological journey through time, with Audio-Animatronics hosts, beginning in the 1880s and ending with G.E.’s modern Medallion Home of the 1960s. EPCOT would be similar in some respects to G.E.’s carousel. Although EPCOT would not rotate, it also would be in a state of technological becoming. Disney’s own ‘carousel of life’ began at the end of the Victorian Age and closed with a final act that included visits to Space Age places like NASA to help him develop his futuristic EPCOT concept.

Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan also served as an inspiration to Disney. It includes a park, historic buildings, and a showcase of American industry and technology. According to animator Ward Kimball, Disney and Ford enjoyed a ‘mutual admiration society.’ Disney visited Greenfield Village more than once. Its exhibits include Thomas Edison’s Menlo Park and Florida laboratories, pieces of the Kitty Hawk flyer, and
early tabulation equipment. Greenfield Village is at least symbolic of the state of becoming philosophy. Its inventions and laboratories reflect the staggering pace of technological change since the Industrial Revolution.

Disney was determined to build EPCOT and brought to bear a formidable team, vision, and years of experience accomplishing what to others seemed to be the impossible. Biographer Bob Thomas notes that ‘Disneyland became a crusade for Walt, more so than sound cartoons, color, animated features and all the other innovations he had planned.’ EPCOT was Disney’s attempt to top Disneyland. It would be the final crusade. Retired General William E. ‘Joe’ Potter recalled that development of the EPCOT and Disney World master plan ‘occupied a large part of the last year of Walt Disney’s life.’ In 1986, Lillian Disney recalled that her husband ‘wanted this city of tomorrow. I can just see him drawing a wagon wheel. He really wanted to make it work.’

However, EPCOT remained a concept at the time of Disney’s death. Real estate economist Harrison Price emphasizes that it was planned ‘in the last stages of a man’s life, in a … hurry, to do what he said he wanted to do, which is to leave 25 years of work for his organization.’ Disney protégé Card Walker also recalls that ‘he [Disney] had a feeling of pressure that he had to get this going.’ When Disney was determined to complete a project, it was difficult to deter him. At the opening of Walt Disney World in 1971, Roy O. Disney concluded that his brother had ‘great determination, singleness of purpose and drive; and through his entire life he was never pushed off his course or diverted to other things.’

Disney often ‘played his hunches’ and usually won. Disneyland, originally viewed as a ‘kiddie park’ amongst the orange groves of Southern California, became the first theme park and is visited by people from around the world. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), the first full-length animated feature film, was known as ‘Disney’s Folly’ during production. The classic film introduced a new genre to family entertainment and continued to establish profit records for the studio. Imagineer Marvin Davis, who worked closely with Disney on the EPCOT plans, probably reflected Disney’s feelings about that particular hunch when he said, ‘I spent weeks and weeks developing this plan that I thought was damn good.’

Over the years, comparisons have been made between Disney and Leonardo da Vinci. Obviously, the two men are from different times and differ immensely from one another, but there are similarities that shed light on the EPCOT concept. In 1942, Sir David Low, a noted British political cartoonist, concluded that Disney and his team were the most significant figures in graphic art since da Vinci. In 1969, urban historian Lewis Mumford stated, ‘There are many lessons to be drawn from Leonardo’s example; but the most important one, perhaps, is that he demonstrated that the integration of science and the humanities with life is actually possible.’ EPCOT planning would bring together some of the nation’s most talented artists and the latest in technology from the research and development laboratories of American industry.
The need for such an approach also was identified by architect Victor Gruen in his book, *The Heart of Our Cities* (1964). According to Imagineer John Hench, Disney had been ‘studying Victor Gruen a long time.’ Gruen concluded that one of the serious problems in planning is that specialization in the professions can result in losing sight of the overall objective. He added that the men ‘of the Renaissance did not have this problem. How would one classify Leonardo da Vinci? As an architect? A city planner? An engineer? A sculptor? An industrial designer? A graphic artist? A transportation expert? He had no title, no license, no academic degree.’ Sharon Disney Lund, Disney’s younger daughter, recalled that her father admired Leonardo. In the entertainment industry, Disney was accustomed to seeking input from a wide array of professionals and, according to landscape architect Morgan ‘Bill’ Evans, ‘Wherever he turned, he learned from experts all that he thought he ought to know about that particular endeavor.’

While King Arthur had his knights, Disney was surrounded by a team of Renaissance men, or at least professionals trained to work alongside the many vocations in the motion picture business. Imagineer Randy Bright wrote, ‘The WED staff became a harmonic blend of talents that was unparalleled in the entertainment industry. It consisted of designers, architects, writers, sculptors, engineers, creators of special effects, and imaginative people from many other disciplines.’

This multidisciplinary approach to the future continues to have relevance today. Urban historian Sir Peter Hall writes, ‘The almost certain growth drivers in this coming era are of course informational: they will combine artistic and intellectual creativity with technological innovativeness, on the model first created in Hollywood between 1915 and 1940 … ’ Disney also realized that growth drivers combined art, technology, and commerce. From the outset, Disney’s Medici family was the public. With all of the company’s products, including EPCOT, Disney was concerned with meeting the needs of people.

Disney also understood that EPCOT would bring newer issues, such as regulation, social planning, and community governance, to the forefront. He paved the way for the enactment of three statutes by the state of Florida to create a special district for the property the company owned there as well as two municipalities. Disney did not have time before his death to work out the social aspects of the experimental community in great detail. Most of the corresponding legal issues were unresolved. Still, Marvin Davis recalled that Disney wanted to help solve all of the problems confronting society with EPCOT. The concept would combine experiments in physical planning, institutional design, technology, and other disciplines.

For example, the EPCOT planning team drew freely from urban history, including stenographer Sir Ebenezer Howard’s (1850–1923) classic book, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (1902). This utopian vision was republished in 1965 with an introductory essay by Lewis Mumford. He compared Howard’s Garden City with Leonardo da Vinci’s plan to reduce congestion and squalor
in Milan.\textsuperscript{23} Howard’s book initially was published in 1898 as \textit{To-morrow! A Peaceful Path to Real Reform}. It was a reaction to the horrific conditions in industrial cities like London, where raw sewage flowed in the streets.\textsuperscript{24} Such conditions gave rise to the need for public planning. Marvin Davis, trained in architecture at the University of Southern California, probably was familiar with Howard’s Garden City tradition. Beginning in 1949, Disney spent four consecutive summers in England to shoot films like \textit{Treasure Island} with English casts and crews. He was exposed to the British New Town movement then underway.\textsuperscript{25} The self-contained, postwar New Towns of England, with their roots in the Garden City, are reminiscent of the EPCOT planning model.

There are many reasons why Disney’s experimental community concept never came to fruition after his death. These include the loss of his vision and leadership, the potential cost of such an undertaking, and the legal and community governance complexities involved. The concept changed and its influence can be seen in several other company projects, including the Epcot Center theme park and the planned community of Celebration, Florida. Still, EPCOT’s transit orientation, concern for the environment, and other aspects of the original concept take on increasing relevance today. Disney introduced the preliminary plans for the EPCOT concept in his 1966 Florida Film. He stated that although the plans might change over time, the basic philosophy for Disney World would remain much the same.\textsuperscript{26}

A full-size copy of Michelangelo’s \textit{David} stands over Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California, where Disney is buried. Not far away are the Walt Disney Studios. Perhaps the men of antiquity and the Renaissance were correct: there really is nothing new under the ersatz Hollywood sun. But something new was ‘wagging the tail’ of the Audio-Animatronics dog. Man would soon set foot on the moon just decades after the Wright brothers took to the sky in North Carolina. Somewhere west of Cape Kennedy, beneath the Florida sky, 27,443 acres waited for the Sculptor to reveal solutions to the greatest challenge of all: community – The Greatest Show, right here on Earth.
CONCEPT