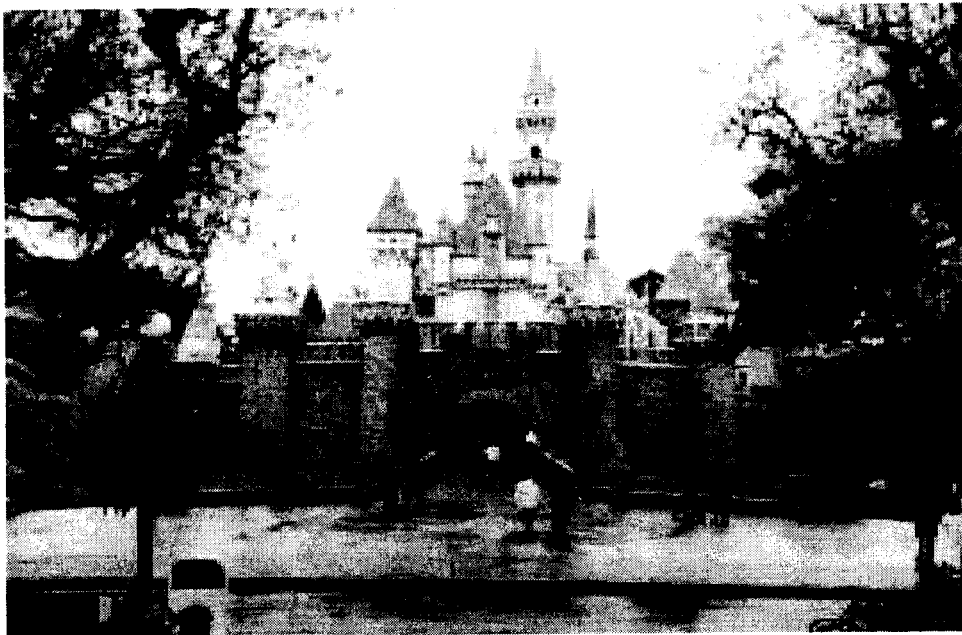


THE THEME PARK: Aspects of Experience in a Four-Dimensional Landscape

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"Disneyland would be a world of Americans, past and present, seen through my imagination...." – **Walt Disney**

Index to Material Culture in Theme Parks

Introduction

Theme parks are dominant features on the landscape of American popular culture; like all culture, they are a realm of objects, images, and ideas. Rarely is a survey of that landscape undertaken without some mention of the invention or influence of theme parks. Yet, born in 1955 with Walt Disney's prototype Disneyland in Anaheim, California, it is not a cultural institution that lends itself readily to arts-and-objects scholarship. This difficulty is rooted in the concept

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that values and ideals, not artifacts, are the core animators of the parks, and these are the final and most abstract, not the first or obvious, stage of study of cultural signs and symbols. Clouding the situation further are three main causes that pose inherent difficulties for definition and description.

1. Form: The term "theme park" is loosely applied within the industry itself, lumping true themed environments with more traditional – but culturally limited - amusement and thrill parks.

2. Function: As with all art, the benefit to the user is emotional (affective) and abstract. However, the theming device is creatively recombinant, making clear comparisons to more traditional forms of art difficult. The very scale of these installations, compounding artifacts, artforms, and media, confounds traditional definition and categorization.

3. Values: These are unabashedly commercial ventures - anathema to the scholarly class system of subjects. The anti-commercial and/or corporate bias of the scholarly observer often obscures the fact that the powerful draw of true themed environments relies more on their ability to reflect core American values than on providing amusement in the conventional sense of the circus, carnival, and pleasure park, related thematically to turn-of-the-century trolley parks.

Form, function, and values are not only the reasons theme parks are important but also why their very concept is not well studied or positioned intellectually. Here is a new artform with ancient roots, widely appreciated and supported by the public but not well understood at an intellectual level. The educated elite and most scholars of culture tend to opt for reflexive criticism of popular culture in preference over a structured analysis of theme parks. For a typical illustration of the large body of work of this nature, well-reviewed in the academic press, see Henry A. Giroux's 1999 title, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*.

Certainly they are recognized as iconic masterworks by the people who repeatedly use and support them with their time and dollars: the Disney-theme-park-going American public. The U.S. Disney parks attract upwards of 50 million visits a year, exceeding visits to the nation's capital. (If you find this fact disturbing, re-read "Values," above.) If wide and repeated use, appreciation, and integration with all life aspects is a measure of the importance of material culture, the Disneyland experience alone has proven to be a singular source of a highly valued shared experience over the span of five generations.

As an additional measure of their significance, the trope of theming has now influenced every sort of public space, from malls, airports, office buildings, restaurants, and hotels, to college campuses, main streets, re-created historic spaces, and museums. There is hardly a space remaining, including our own homes, where the telltale imprint of the theme park has not left its colorful and

varied impression. This includes the ubiquitous “shrines” to Star Wars, Disney, Coca-Cola, and the universe of collectibles.

Defining the Genre

The theme park can be defined as: *A social artwork designed as a four-dimensional symbolic landscape, evoking impressions of places and times, real and imaginary* (Browne & Browne, p. 387-389).

Thus, theme parks are a total-sensory-engaging environmental art form built to express a coherent but multi-layered message. Amusement parks, on the other hand, are limited experiences whose attraction focuses on the immediate physical gratification of the thrill ride as it mimics near-death risk-taking experiences. (See Table 1.)

Theme parks are symbolic landscapes of cultural narratives. They are the multi-dimensional descendant of the epic, book, play, and film; four-dimensional stories in which the “guests” – in theme park parlance – can immerse themselves. While both may offer rides, theme park “dark rides” are but one of many communications media integrated into the body of the park to punctuate the overall theme. Like the camera lens, they position the visitor to follow a series of vignettes advancing the narrative. Rides expand the narrative experience with appropriate physical sensations, never for effect alone, but always to advance the storyline. It is the architecture, public space design, landscaping, musical cueing, detailing, and the use of symbols, archetypes, and icons – not rides – that define the essence of theme parks.

The concept of the “themed” environment first entered the American consciousness with the opening of Disneyland. While Walt Disney created the place, he did not create the defining term. The term “theme park” was coined after the fact by a journalist at the *Los Angeles Times* when the terminology of the traditional amusement park proved inadequate to capture the total experience of Disney’s creation.

Although the amusement park industry has appropriated the term “theme park,” this has more to do with the industry hierarchy—the status and ambition of staff and owners—than any actual content or visitor experience. Little overlap connects the two types in look, behavior, audience, or outcome. So highly prized is the “theme” moniker that the Six Flags company prefers the term over the more accurate “thrill park,” ironically condemning itself to a perpetual second-class position in the industry after Disney, rather than claim their quite legitimate first place in the “thrill industry.” Although the terms “theme park” and “amusement park” are today applied interchangeably, they have distinctly different origins, design, intent, and effects.

In fact, Walt Disney’s stated reason for creating a new form of park was his dismay and disgust with the carnival ancestry of the amusement park with its “tough-looking people” and “Us (the Carnies) vs. Them (the visitors, or “rubes”)”

attitude. The “games of chance” (little chance is allowed – carneys refer to these not as games, but as “stores”), freak shows, Tunnels of Love, and the corresponding atmosphere of illicit danger drew predominately lower-class male teens and young adults. Disney built his park in direct opposition expressly for the post-WW II emerging middle-class family on wheels. The enduring genius of Disney’s invention has set the gold standard in the language as well as the cosmopolitan art style of attraction design.

Extending the traditional symbolic landscape

Disney’s was not a new species of amusement park, but a form of symbolic landscape that traces its ancestry back to the abstract elegance and high concept



Theme parks are symbolic landscapes of cultural narratives; four-dimensional stories in which the “guests” — in theme park parlance — can immerse themselves.

of the Zen garden, itself a recombinant form, born in Korea and nurtured in Japan. Themed environments are rooted not in action nor in testing the laws of physics, but in an impulse at the opposite end of human experience: mental submission to the power of a physical landscape and in its effect on the imagination.

America's class system of aesthetics has little difficulty appreciating the ethereal enchantment of place: the stone Zen garden of Ruyanji, nature under mental control of human design; the Taj Mahal by moonlight, monument to the immortality of remembrance; the Lincoln Memorial, shrine to nationalism; or the Grand Canyon, "the wonder of nature's own realm," to use the Disney



Amusement parks are limited experiences whose attraction focuses on the immediate physical gratification of the thrill ride as it mimics near-death risk-taking experiences.

phrase. These places have the powerful ability to evoke because they bypass the conscious mind to plug directly into our pre-conscious cultural matrix. This matrix is built up over centuries of symbol-making, imagery, and iconography.

Theme parks rarely share intellectual appreciation with Ruyanji or the Taj Mahal, but this is due to "class-ism," not to their actual impact. The power of Disney's own three-dimensional Zen garden is as compelling and significant as those cited above. It is as important to us as our imported cultural concept of Tibet, a place Americans have known not first-hand but only through media (Schell, 2000). Disneyland's power, shared with other compelling landscapes, is rooted in culture and shaped as a matrix of cues that point to our most passionate and deeply felt ideas about who we are and how we think as a people. This cultural attraction moves people through the park's sequence of themes.

Theme parks should be considered as prominent, even central, American cultural icons, not only because they are popular forms, but because they offer an index to culture in themselves.

Form

Theme parks should be considered among the most significant social artworks of the twentieth century, if for no other reason than they are deeply rooted in, and reflective of, American core values. The original Disneyland park in California was a prototype of a whole new genre of recombinant art form: part art, part artifact, comprising architecture of every era, crafts of every land, and innovative as well as ancient art technologies. They are the hybrid descendents of world's fairs, museums, and the architectural follies and pleasure gardens formerly reserved for royalty and wealth. In fact, it is natural landscaping that is the prime differentiator between theme parks and other types (Scheu, 1996). Conceived and designed by team intelligence - Walt Disney Imagineering - their "collections" of installations and artifacts are integrated in what senior Imagineer John Hench called a "sequence of related experiences" (Goldberger, 1973, p. 433). They are closely related to the film arts, which, in themselves, encompass any and all art forms such as set design, special effects, and digital processing.

Given their great success over half a century, it is difficult to recall that before the opening of Disneyland in the summer of 1955, only a handful of designers understood what Disney was driving at. For this reason, Disney showed the building process of the park via television on ABC TV's "Disneyland" program as the park grew, week after week, closer to completion and the final unveiling. In an ingenious PR campaign, Disney thus made the entire US viewing audience psychological shareholders in his enterprise as it came to life.

Disneyland, and the themed and partly themed parks that followed, pose a particularly vexing case study to the cataloguer and archivist, as well as to the mind-maps and mental file folders of those who study artifacts as sources of knowledge. Here is a complex and confounding amalgam of periods, styles,

materials, and sources. Worlds or lands unto themselves, they are self-contained, hermetically sealed museums of culture, freestanding capsules of civilization culled from various eras and locales. Their design, production, and problem-solving systems evoke DaVinci's Renaissance atelier more than a single artistic



Disney's park is a form of symbolic landscape that traces its ancestry back to the abstract elegance and high concept of the Zen garden, such as this one in Kyoto, rooted in a mental submission to the power of a physical landscape and in its effect on the imagination.

hand or corporate decision-maker. Walt Disney himself admitted to being less artist and more story editor and idea-generator - comparing himself to a bee flitting from flower to flower to cross-pollinate the idea process.

Public attention has been drawn to the huge profitability of the theme park. The corporate success of the multi-media conglomerate that today bears Disney's name, however, is an outcome of that system's success, not the driving force for its creative output. The general public supports the art of the parks through admissions and merchandise sales. (The Florentine Renaissance, by contrast, was the flowering of corporate church and merchant patronage.) This output of a half century and thousands of minds makes for difficult documentation, whether in the mind or on paper. Art history is based on the concept of individual genius unfolding across decades to a small audience of critics and historians. The theme park presents at the other end of the scale: a collective imagination, using conferences and picture-based storyboard "scripts" as in filmmaking, implementing a wide universe of technologies that far exceeds the bounds of painting, graphics, and sculpture.

Refusing to fall into the neat categories and chronologies of the art historian, these robust forms are virtual artscares that incorporate and reinvent their “real” art sources. Landscaping and green space are the distinctive features of the theme park, yet another key index distinction from the amusement or thrill park. These multi-media installations are total-immersion environments, highly interactive in the form of enclosed “dark rides,” landscapes both interior and exterior, animation combined with live-action, computer-coordinated effects, and visitor-generated narratives that evoke in the guest a mental journey not only to another place, but often to another time—however selective the historical narratives.

In addition, they are not static but constantly evolving. Walt Disney often noted that “Disneyland will never be completed as long as there is imagination left in the world.” In Disneyland today, as in life itself, many valued icons of previous generations — Captain Hook’s pirate ship and Skull Rock, the Nautilus Submarines, Nature’s Wonderland, The Painted Desert, the WEDway People Mover, even the House of Tomorrow — exist only in memory and faded photographs. Tomorrowland has been completely rebuilt twice from its 1950s base, which was, in itself, styled after the popular future-vision evocations of the 1930s.



The Jungle Cruise: Disney’s conception of a “total immersion” experience to transport the park traveler back in time and across vast spaces applied the power of the physical setting to capture the imagination of audiences of every age and origin.

Yet this complex landscape of continuously evolving features can be productively viewed from a single point: the cultural values that lie at the source of their creation and continual rebirth through redesign. Disney's original way of taking the world apart and putting it back together for heightened effect – "theming" – snaps into focus when observed from the vantage point of the shared values that are the building blocks of the theming process.

Function

Theme parks are a distillation of cultural values. In this way they operate as a four-dimensional thematic index. With their panoply of themed stage sets, they are a showcase of archetypal forms – the material artifacts foreshortened as icons and images free of contradictions. The walk-through castles, frontier forts, and other exotic but familiar environments, populated by cartoon characters the size of forklifts, are simulations and symbols, not historic or scientific models. Disney completely avoids any authenticity claims, so important to museums or historic sites. This is because his venture is not about the technics of the artifact; it is about our attachment to the idea of the thing. This becomes a far more philosophical question, and therefore far more central to understanding the mind of culture.

The theme park's power lies in the ability to entertain, in its original meaning of "focus the attention" rather than merely amuse. While amusement and entertainment are terms too often used interchangeably, the root distinction between the distraction of amusement and the concentration of entertainment is quite critical to understanding the uses and influences of social forms in popular culture.

But this type of entertainment, along with great rhetoric, drama, and artwork, is the most important aspect of the cultural process: cultivating values and abstractions through the generations encoded as images, structures, enactments, and re-creations. If America has a successful temple of culture in this country – by this operational definition and attendance figures — it is the theme park rather than the museum or library. Many of the "traditional" (which frequently means "in living memory") roles of the institutions based on text have been taken over by – or, more correctly, returned to – the immediacy of the visual arts and story-telling that transcends age and erudition. The family learning initiative mounted among a consortium of US museums (Henderson & Watts, 2000), is founded on the same premise as Walt Disney's – total environmental learning for family groups, who will look back at their shared interactive learning as psychologically valuable in itself.

Theme parks are the most diverse four-dimensional artform, integrating most known art genres from low-tech to multi-media and electronic simulation. Many new technologies show up in the beta-laboratory of the parks in experimental form, later to migrate into the "real" spaces of gallery and stage. Also,

like the historic recreations of Williamsburg and Greenfield Village, theme parks can be enclaves of past as well as future technologies. The sailing ship *Columbia* docked at Disney's Rivers of America is the first three-masted ship to be built since the 1800s. The craftsmanship that fashions the antique woodworking in old-era structures at Fantasyland is no longer found or taught in house design, but lives on in the parks, as does the art of pedestrianism, along with the peaceful mingling of diverse people, as sources of pleasure in themselves, belying the "death of public space" proclaimed by urban planners in the 1970s (see King, 1981).

The theme park does far more than create mini-cultural domains in three dimensions. It brings the fourth dimension of time to bear in the experience equation, transporting the viewer through periods out of time as well as places out of sight. This reliance on themed times and spaces is a major departure from the less-complex attraction of gravity and speed rides. Theming distinguishes the sophistication of the theme park from its older, earthier relative, the amusement park.

Disneyland (conflated with its inventor) is an American icon per se, but within its various "lands" and the myriad paths that lead among and between them, it is a clearly coded text, set in icons and images, easily read by any age and across cultures — the principal reason for its success as an American export. Almost no written text — directional signs, instructions, labels — intrudes, except as part of the image and symbol landscape of various themes within its borders. Nor is there any need, since the artifacts within are self-explanatory because they resonate within the contextual landscapes. Icons are the signposts that cue the traversing "readers" to the rich patterns of meaning that surround them. The ability of foreign visitors to read the parks as archetypal American landscapes, and to demand park reincarnations abroad in Tokyo, Paris, and Hong Kong, is testament to the universal symbolic language in which they are couched.

Much discussion has persisted about this artform in its liberal political, anti-commercial, and social control aspects, but little of its fundamental appeal as cultural icon, aesthetic force, or place-making model has been addressed. Yet within its protective visual shell - the berm that blocks the world outside, as a frame circumscribes a painting - guests have discovered its power to disclose and reinforce the core values of their own culture.

In this regard, theme parks share a desired outcome with museums, which are mandated to decode culture through their high-material-culture collections of arts and artifacts. But too often museums are not equal to their own material, burdening their collections and exhibits with miles of text meant to "explain" what is on display. The parks are innocent of this ambition, believing in the implicit power of the artifact, carefully chosen and positioned in context, to explain itself without words. This is the major difference between the mode of theming and other types of display: one shows or evokes, while the other tells or imparts. It is the theme park that finally puts the magic of the artifact to its full effect.

Values

Heritage parks and outdoor museums exist world-wide, but they don't approach the symbolic achievement of the theme park, which is an American invention designed to go to the heart of our culture, to the values that make it distinctive among all others by distilling its essence. So far, it appears to be a uniquely American form as a major export. The question is why the theme park as we know it is uniquely attached to American values. When the parks are imported, it is for their Americanness, which is a matter of values as well as the images that carry them. As defined here, the form does not seem to fill a need in other cultures to showcase their own values, but is used as a vehicle for American ideals.

Americans take a peculiar view of culture – we don't think we have any. We are, first and foremost, a nation of individuals. The base unit of American culture is the individual, not the group, family, clan, tribe, religion, or nation. The notion that all Americans do not share the same core beliefs is, ironically, the first belief that all Americans share.

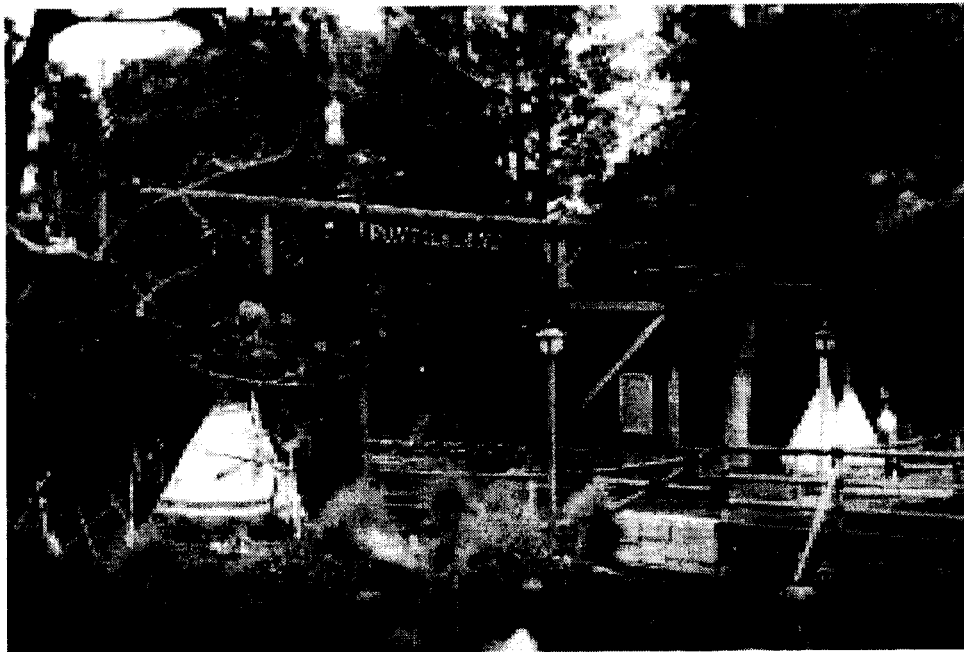
Perhaps the reason Americans choose to accent their differences rather than their similarities is that we unconsciously share so many values in common that overt differences are the only tool we have to declare our culturally mandated individuality. Whatever the cause, our popular culture mythology has always centered on the resolution of the dichotomy between the needs of the individual and those of the community. The attributes of our popular heroes have remained remarkably consistent for over two centuries. The stylization has evolved from trailblazer to cowboy to firefighter and astronaut. Gender, race, and even species, seem to be irrelevant. Behavior – the purest expression of cultural beliefs – is all that matters. Popular heroes in literature, film, television, and theme park, male and female, human, animal, fantasy or alien, are distinctly, if not aggressively, individualistic. They live to a personal code and care little for the popular opinion of the moment. Yet they never act for personal gain, only for the benefit or defense of the group. They are ordinary people, reluctant to fight, forced into action by extraordinary circumstances. They seek no reward but to return to normal life.

Cultural values are simply broad tendencies of the members of any group to prefer one state of affairs over another. They operate below our conscious horizon as largely unexamined assumptions about the way the world "should" be: in terms of ideals or, taken to extremes, even fantasy. While situational alignments of environmental and social forces may slow or frustrate the short-term realization, over generations group movement is *always* in the direction of the culturally desired state. By tracking this consistent movement over generation, Jamie O'Boyle, senior analyst at the Center for Cultural Studies & Analysis, has identified seven of the principal cultural drivers or "shoulds."

1. Individuals should determine their own destiny
2. Individuals should control their social and physical environment
3. Authority or “bigness” should be viewed with suspicion
4. Actions should be judged in a moral light
5. We should have as many choices as possible
6. Anything can and should be improved
7. The future should be better than the past

The cultural imperatives above are densely packed into the themes and stories of each theme park domain: the ethic of progress, the core American belief that the future should be better than the past, is explicit throughout. The doctrine of progress is coupled with the control of one’s own destiny, the founding doctrine of America itself. The offshoots of mobility, freedom, and self-determination rule Rivers of America, Adventureland, Frontierland, and Tomorrowland.

Control of social and physical environment is inherent in the high concept of the theme park itself, in Disney’s creation of a world fabricated as an extension of American values and ethics showcased on the entryway, Main Street, USA. So is the ideal of freedom as choice — as many as possible — as indispensable to freedom and self-determination. The messages are fractal, built into the basic themes, linked together, each distinct but readily accessible from every other.



Disneyland’s Frontierland: These virtual experiences allow the visitor to participate in mythic rituals of the culture.”

Throughout the park, those inventions and innovations that attest to the improvability of all features of life are showcased. When city planners today say "Main Street, USA," it is Disney's model they are invoking.

The park's subjects and themes exceed the range of any living American. They are drawn from those attributes of American character that Americans like most about themselves, and that those from other cultures most often cite as admirable about us. As in a magic mirror, we see our national culture as a tangible shared experience that makes value abstractions come to life. E. L. Doctorow noted in *The Book of Daniel* (1971) that these virtual experiences allow the visitor to "participate in mythic rituals of the culture." This is no mean feat: it has been the beau ideal of the arts since the beginning of time - to objectify states of mind so that they become visible in time and space as shared perceptions.

Disney's motive in building his value-based parks was to create a place the whole family could enjoy together, from child to adult, offering value to each according to its needs as individuals, with the high value-added attraction of the emotional bonding that occurs through shared experience. The park was not designed for children, but for families that included children - with shared experience as the most valuable desired outcome. Disneyland became instantly popular for the reason any successful American popular culture finds its audience: because it acts as a tool to resolve the eternal dichotomy between the needs of the individual and those of the group. The park is remarkable among artforms for its ability to successfully bring about this resolution.

Summary

Theming is the art of evoking "instant moods." Taking its cue from the success of Disney's prototypes, themed environments have expanded far beyond the gates of Disneyland and Walt Disney World. Now it has become a challenge to discover anything not themed: either by ethnicity, place, or retro design. Shopping malls are a legacy of the car-free environment created by the parks, which space critics said the US public would never assent to because they could not bear to be parted from their beloved autos. Institutions from hospitals to malls to resorts hearken to the Disney approach to customer service as "guest relations." And, as Richard Snow pointed out in *American Heritage* (1987), the Main Street revival movement of the National Trust was incubated in Disneyland's faux, but compelling, Main Street, USA.

Like all great artists, Disney showed us how to see our own recent past as a culmination of the artforms of the past: architecture, painting, novels, films, theater. His conception of a "total immersion" experience to transport the park traveler back in time and across vast spaces applied the power of the physical setting to capture the imagination of audiences of every age and origin. This

imaginative re-invention of place produced the unparalleled multiplier effect of theming within culture, both to amplify its reach as art and as a psychological tool devised to explore our own values.

Values and ideals, cued by art and artifacts, are the keys to theme parks by definition. Living at the heart of American civilization, these culture capsules are most deserving of the focused attention of the material culturalist and cultural analyst. Certainly they are among the richest sources of artifacts and idea pieces available, and are keystones to understanding the American mind.

Table 1: Contrast of Major Attributes of Amusement v. Theme parks

Amusement Parks	Theme Parks
Kinetics	Story
Action	Affect
Motion	Emotion
Challenge	Validation
Physical	Mental
Adolescence	Children, coming of age, adult, senior
Events	Values
Ride nodes	Landscape, design nodes
Dramatic motion	Dramatic detail
Motion states	Aesthetic states
Amusement	Entertainment
Curiosity	Culture
Thrill	Value
Peer-group bond	National communal ethic

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