

Fantasy cities

John Hannigan

It's slick, it's seductive and it's coming to a city near you.

John Hannigan reports on the creeping 'disneyfication' of our urban environments.

If all goes according to plan, sometime early in the next century a consortium of companies led by Canada's Reichmann family (late of the controversial Canary Wharf project in London's East End) will open the doors to 'Destination Technodome'. The \$450 million indoor entertainment and sports complex will be built on the site of a former air force base on the northern edge of Toronto. The facility will include a year-round 150-metre ski hill, a whitewater rafting course, mountain-climbing walls, a Hollywood-inspired theme park and a 30-screen multiplex cinema. That's in addition to a fabricated tropical rainforest and replica of Bourbon Street in New Orleans.

Destination Technodome is one of a new breed of entertainment centres intended to anchor the 'fantasy cities' of the future where tourism, entertainment and retail development are to be bundled together in a 'themed' environment. These urban projects are being marketed as the saviours of declining downtown cores and of stagnant suburban shopping centres. But not everyone agrees. Critics like US writer Paul Goldberger argue that this new urbanism of leisure will further encourage the privatization of public places and the erosion of neighbourhood identities. Goldberger labels developments like Destination Technodome 'urbanoid environments'. Like the pod-bred clones in the science fiction movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* they seem to be genuine, but something isn't quite right. What's missing is a sense of the serendipity, diversity and humanity of traditional street life.

The template for these quasi-cities is the Walt Disney version of the theme park which has forever changed our image of what urban life should be. To appeal to its mainly white, middle-class suburban market Disney crafted a simulated vision of the world which was both idealized and stripped bare of any significant risk, conflict or controversy. Whether in California, Tokyo or Florida, Disneyland visitors need not worry about tripping over garbage, being accosted by panhandlers and 'squeegee kids' or being mugged in the middle of the day. Instead, city life means sampling 'old tyme' fudge or listening to a brass band in the town square. Similarly, exotic foreign locales are rendered accessible and safe: no language or currency problems, stomach and intestinal upsets or political instability. This 'sanitized razzmatazz', as New York Times architecture writer Herbert Muschamp calls it, can easily triumph over the real thing. Each year during the March school break, several families from my wife's home town in rural Canada faithfully make a pilgrimage to the Disney resorts in Florida. After returning last winter one of the dads observed (without irony): 'I don't need to go to the South Pacific. I've already seen Tahiti at the Polynesian Village.'

In adapting the Disney blueprint to the contemporary 'theme park city', architects, developers and planners have borrowed and refined two key Disney strategies. To package the new entertainment destinations, they have embraced an architectural style which is designed to create an aura of fantasy, delight and well-being among onlookers.

Whereas storefronts along traditional shopping streets are often diverse and compete with one another visually, the retail establishments in fantasy cities are uniform and harmonious, suggesting consensus and contentment. But reassuring as it may be Disney-inspired architecture is also blatantly commercial – a fusion of consumerism, entertainment and popular culture.

At 'The Showcase Mall' in Las Vegas – a non-gambling entertainment complex on the famous 'Strip' – the 'World of Coca-Cola' is fronted by the world's biggest Coke bottle, 100 feet high. Engineered to capitalize on the worldwide recognition of its brand name, the World of Coca Cola contains a series of interactive exhibits which celebrate Coke bottles, jingles and memories as well as a retail store which sells Coke-themed products. Urban culture here translates into the 'Coca-Cola Salute to Folk Art' which displays the work of artists from 14 nations who have designed oversize Coke-bottle sculptures using an array of styles. Inside, the architectural highlight is the 'Fantastic Fountain', featuring 866 Coke bottles which uncork a laser-like flow during a choreographed sound and light show.

Another significant component of the Disney model is its elaborate but largely invisible surveillance and control system. Thomas Vonier, an architect who has consulted widely with the US State Department on security matters, cites the Disney theme parks as one of the best contemporary examples of what he terms 'large-scale urban control zones'. At Disney World in Florida, visitors' movements are discreetly but firmly directed by a combination of recorded voices, robots in human form and employees. To ensure that guests are directed away from or towards specific locations, Disney uses a combination of technology (monorails and other transportation systems) and physical barriers such as pools, fountains and flower gardens. An action as innocent as taking off your shoes will bring an instant intervention and reprimand. Efficient as it may be, this control system also acts to ensure that guests exclusively follow an itinerary laid out by the park's designers.

Fantasy cities have adopted this same 'Panopticon' model. In designing Boston's Faneuil Hall, the prototypical 'festival marketplace', developer James Rouse sent his project manager straight to Disney World to learn the most effective methods of maintenance and security. At the West Edmonton Mall, the first shopping centre in the world to devote a major portion of its space to entertainment, security guards sit behind a glass wall in Central Dispatch monitoring banks of closed-circuit televisions and computers which reach into every corner of the mall.

In Manhattan, the Disney company has led a drive to sanitize Times Square, formerly one of America's sleaziest porn-pits. Now uniformed, radio-equipped public-safety officers employed by the Times Square Business Improvement District make twice-daily visits to the 45 locations of a computerized watch system to check citizen reports of public misbehaviour. The same no-nonsense approach is spreading to other areas of public life. In Los Angeles transit authorities have introduced 'bum-proof' benches which make sleeping impossible. And, as I found out first hand in a library in Toronto's entertainment district, even a brief attempt at napping can earn a threat of ejection from the building's security staff.

The 'disneyfication' of our cities reflects a larger societal trend toward the 'commodification' and 'passportization' of experience. Today people buy and collect 'leisure experiences' the same way they do consumer goods. And like the purchase of Ralph Lauren sweaters or Gaggia espresso machines, our choices are designed to increase our holdings of 'cultural capital' – resources which can be used to give us an advantage in our dealings with others.

'Been there, done that' has become the slogan of the 1990s and the logo-imprinted souvenirs from a Hard Rock Cafe or a Planet Hollywood restaurant act as 'passports', proclaiming not only that you have been somewhere interesting but that you have consumed a highly-rated experience. What is significant is not so much the role of consumption in helping to assert status and identity but the fact that consumption is increasingly programmed by giant entertainment corporations.

In the Disney theme parks happy endings are guaranteed. But Cinderella may find it tougher sledding in the fantasy cities of the early 21st century. It seems unlikely that the economic benefits from large-scale megaprojects like festival marketplaces, designer sports arenas and high-technology entertainment centres will automatically spill over into the economically depressed neighbourhoods which frequently surround them.

Cleveland, Ohio was once an industrial powerhouse before its decline in the 1960s. Today in the US it is celebrated as the poster child of resurgent urban development. With a restored entertainment district (Playhouse Square), a newly minted professional sports complex (Gateway Center) and the 'Rock and Roll Hall of Fame' designed by superstar architect IMPei, Cleveland is the American 'comeback city' of the 1990s. Yet these glittering tourist destinations have made little economic difference to the adjacent inner city where 40 per cent of Clevelanders, half of whom are black, remain trapped beneath the poverty line.

Tourists and middle-class day-trippers flock to these glass and plastic entertainment complexes where they feel reasonably safe, though few venture beyond to patronize local bars, restaurants and small shops. Atlantic City, New Jersey is a case in point. Since 1978, the year casinos were first introduced to the city, 100 of the city's 250 restaurants have closed and its population has declined by more than a tenth. Property values have declined and there has been little demand for new inner-city housing, manufacturing or warehouse space. Soon a section of the one remaining stable, middle-class black neighbourhood in the city will be levelled to build a tunnel linking the Atlantic City Expressway to a new \$1.5 billion casino.

Not only are these fantasy entertainment zones expensive to build – Paramount's 'Star Trek: The Experience' complex at the Las Vegas Hilton rings in at \$70 million. They also have a short consumer shelf-life. This means they can be undertaken only by a clutch of deep-pocketed global entertainment companies, like Disney, Universal, Sony, Warner Bros., Paramount and Rank, who own enormous film libraries and gold-plated portfolios of recognizable cartoon and movie characters. Consequently, the line-up of attractions at most themed destinations is highly uniform with little local content. In these new leisure spaces citizenship becomes equated with brand-name consumption and the dream of a lively and creative public culture is crowded out by pre-packaged corporate entertainment.

Even holidays like Christmas and Halloween are being co-opted by commercial 'theming'. In a recent news release Madison Square Garden in New York City announced that the clothing company, Tommy Hilfiger, had agreed to sponsor 'Madison Scare Garden', a Halloween attraction which runs for ten days every October. Designed to become a New York institution much like the Christmas Spectacular at the Radio City Music Hall, there are plans to take the show across the country and into Canada.

Nor are the effects of this themed entertainment juggernaut restricted to North America. Until the recent economic meltdown in Asia, American commercial culture was flourishing in Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and other nations in the Asia-Pacific region. Tokyo Disneyland with an annual attendance of over 17 million is the most popular theme park on earth. There's a Nike store in Shanghai, Hard Rock Cafes in Bangkok, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Taipei. And 'Believe It or Not!' attractions in Korea, Thailand and Hong Kong. Universal Studios has begun construction of a \$1.6 billion entertainment park near Osaka, Japan, which will have areas themed to various American places (Hollywood, New York, San Francisco) and motion pictures (Jaws, Jurassic Park).

Australia too has embraced the entertainment model of urban development. The latest example is the \$66 million Sega World entertainment centre housed in a distinctive glass-coned building on the eastern side of Darling Harbour in Sydney.

As Japanese scholar Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto has shrewdly observed, in the postmodern age America has become another brand name – just like Chanel and Armani. The danger is that this seductive new world of themed and branded entertainment will be one where any sense of common purpose or true citizenship is swamped by ‘made-in-America’ fantasies.

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Inside Disney's dream machine

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