The Disneyfication of American cities

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Washington, DC: Multi Briefs has issued the following news release:

Disneyland is every child's dream and an escape from the messy reality of daily life.

But if you look closely, you will notice that American cities (and increasingly other cities around the world) are being remade in the image of Walt Disney's famous fantasy theme parks. Places like the Mall of America, where every move is engineered, draw on the Disney rule book and have co-opted public spaces.

Who doesn't love Disney? They don't call it the "Magic Kingdom" for nothing. But is there not something sinister when we begin to apply the Disney principles to entire cities?

Imagineering our cities

Andrew O'Hagain, writing in The New York Times, suggests that "if modern sentiment has an architecture, it was Disney that built it."

Indeed, the crossover between Disney's theme park planning and real-world planning is nothing new. Disney's "Imagineers'' -- as they call their master planners -- have crossed over to build an actual residential community in Celebration, Florida.

Inspired by Disney World's original plans for EPCOT as an experimental proto-community, it offered itself as "yet another fresh start in a world gone wrong." However, despite the integration of cutting-edge New Urbanist principles -- with a compact downtown and walkable streets -- the somewhat-creepy, overdesigned results of the top-down utopian planning turned many Americans off.

On a less literal level, look at how the iconic Main Street that greets Disney visitors has been replicated in the redesign of so many town centers across America.

Disneyfication 101

What exactly do we mean by Disneyfication? It has been used in some cases as a byword for gentrification, and complaints often focus on the ruthless impact of mass tourism, notably in central Amsterdam. However, more specifically Alan Bryman finds four different themes:

Theming -- This is the familiar domain of Rainforest Cafes, with their anamatronic bird noises accompanying your break from a day of shopping at the megamall. or the penchant for heavily themed hotels on the Las Vegas strip.

Dedifferentiation of consumption -- A fancy way of referring to the encroachment of consumption into spaces that serve another purpose. For example, the gift shop you are rerouted through on your way out of a theme park ride.

Merchandising -- From pens to clothing, books and sweets, merchandising plays an increasing role in the branding of popular tourist cities like Berlin and London.

Emotional labor -- This focuses on the people who occupy the themed environment. The scripted interactions and ever-smiling park employees, or big-box storehands whose cheerfulness distracts us from the fact we are probably being pitched a sale.

Several of these themes have serious implications for how we shape our cities.

Creating a city without the ghettos
The Disney model is so appealing to city planners because it attempts to reduce all the messy complexities of contemporary cities. As architectural historian Jennifer Gray reminds, in Disneyland "there are no dangerous ghettos."

If there is one place that best exemplifies the Disneyfication of America's urban landscape, it is the 4.87 million-square-foot Mall of America. Ada Louise Huxtable finds that the mall -- a palace to consumption masquerading as a public space -- reminds us that the "surrogate experience and surrogate environments have become the American way of life."

But at the heart of peoples' discomfort with this wave of sugar-coated artificiality washing over our cities is that sense that the predictability it engenders goes against the grain of what it means to live in a city -- great cities are inherently unpredictable.

Securitization

Another lesson cities have learned from Disney is how to deal with security. While theme parks may feel spontaneous, they are in fact highly ordered (and often manipulative) spaces. Each tiny step is engineered using advanced crowd-control tools.

CCTV cameras play an increasingly important role in our cities, too, tracking our every move and using advanced facial recognition technology. London is said to have around 500,000 security cameras placed around the city, and the numbers in New York are quickly rising.

A more subtle lesson learned from the highly controlled spaces of Disney theme parks is that we can engineer the movements of people around a city and nudge their behavior through the built environment. The social engineering of "hostile architecture," with its anti-homeless benches is one example.

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