

**University of Hanover**  
English Department  
Academic Writing SoSe 2005  
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## **Disney's Utopia: Dream and Reality**

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Only few people know that Walt Disney not only created a range of fantasy-worlds but also engaged himself in the creation of schemes to improve the way real people live together. In the early 1960s, during the last months of his life, he was working on plans for an “Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT)”. This prototype community was planned together with its own airport and transportation system as part of Disney World in Florida, on land owned by the Disney Company. In a presentation on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1966, Disney described EPCOT as the heart of the Florida project (Disney, qtd. on Waltopia). With this prototype community he wanted to propose a solution to the problems of modern cities that could be reproduced anywhere in the world. Disney died in 1966 when the plans were still on a preliminary level. Since then his plans have evolved into two projects: the EPCOT-Center as part of the theme park and the company-owned town of Celebration near the theme park. Celebration is just a reduced version of Disney's dream, but it embraces its main ideas: "Celebration is the culmination of a dream Disney had decades ago: to build a town, where people would live, work and play in an environment that embraced new technology" (Wilson, 01A). Today, ten years after the opening of Celebration, it can be said that this concept works. Celebration's citizens are described as pleased with their town and neighbours, even by critical authors like Andrew Ross, who spent a year living in Celebration and wrote the book The Celebration Chronicles about this experience. The underlying idea of reconstructing traditional neighbourhoods combined with the advantages of new technology is the main target of the New Urbanist movement which has supporters around the world. This essay will summarize the main points of Walt Disney's original plans for EPCOT and compare them with the company-owned town of Celebration. This will reveal that Disney's EPCOT might have been utopian, but included some good realistic responses to the problems facing modern cities. These responses were strong enough not only survive to, but also to form the basis of a worldwide movement of urban planning.

The Florida project was to be the culmination of Walt Disney's work. On company owned land in Osceola County, Florida he envisioned a project named Disney World which included not only a theme park but also an airport, convention center and hotel, an industrial area, a transportation system, a commercial area, and a community of 20,000 people, EPCOT (Mannheim, xiv). In a presentation in October 1966 Disney described EPCOT as the heart of this project:

EPCOT will take its cue from the new ideas and new technologies that are now emerging from the creative centers of American industry. It will be a community of tomorrow that will never be completed, but will always be introducing, and testing, and demonstrating new materials and new systems.

And EPCOT will always be a showcase to the world of the ingenuity and imagination of American free enterprise. I don't believe there is a challenge anywhere in the world that's more important to people everywhere than finding solutions to the problems of our cities. [...] EPCOT will be a working community with employment for all. And everyone who lives here will have a responsibility to help keep this community an exciting living blueprint of the future. (Disney, qtd. on Waltopia)

The central idea for this town was to find solutions to urban problems by employing the latest technology and by focussing on the needs and happiness of its residents. EPCOT was to be an experimental site for new approaches to urban planning and therefore never be finished, but always in development (Mannheim, 3).

The physical planning for EPCOT places the commercial area and convention center in the middle of a radial plan. This would be covered by a huge glass-dome to protect it from the weather and to provide a focal point. From this center outwards the other parts of the city are placed on rings that are zoned by streets radiating from the middle outwards: a high-density apartment area next to the center, separated by a greenbelt, with recreational facilities, from single-family neighbourhood areas around the perimeter (Mannheim, 11). This urban shape allows for a separation of motor and pedestrian transport. Additionally, its own transportation system, the 'PeopleMover', was to bring people to places outside walking distance, thus limiting use of cars (Mannheim, 31).

The state of the planning at Disney's death had not come to the point of defining the architectural expression of these ideas. His drawings and descriptions, however, suggest that while the buildings in the center look rather futuristic, the neighbourhood-areas would be more traditional (Pictures on Waltopia). Kevin Shortsleeve points out that Disney had always been obsessed with a romantic idea of the 30's (Shortsleeve, 10). It can therefore be concluded that he had in mind the kind of ideal peaceful environment also promoted in his films and theme parks.

People living in these neighbourhoods would be selected by the Disney Company for their disposition to engage in the community. In his 1966 presentation he listed some further requirements:

It will be a planned, controlled community, a showcase for American industry and research, schools, cultural and educational opportunities. In EPCOT there will be no slum areas because we will not let them develop. There will be no landowners and therefore no voting control. [...] There will be no retirees; everyone must be employed. One of the requirements is that people who live in EPCOT must help keep it alive. (qtd. in Shortsleeve. 16-17)

This seems to be a scary idea, but it is today common practice to control communities by listing requirements or simply by pricing policy. It should, however, not be the task of this

essay to criticise this development. Disney wanted to guarantee the success of his project. The only way he could imagine to do so was by planning on company-owned land, controlling the community and creating special laws for inhabitants and visitors.

Only two months after Walt Disney had presented his project to the public, he died on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1966. In 1971 the first construction phase of the Florida Project was finished and opened as the Walt Disney World theme park. At this point the plans for EPCOT were still being worked on. Steve Mannheim points out two reasons why the plans for the town were cut down fundamentally between 1973 and 1974. Before his death the planning team for EPCOT was exclusively managed by Walt Disney himself. The new management team of the Disney Company was therefore not familiar with the plans and lacked the driving force needed to continue (127-28). On the external level, the general societal and economic situation changed during the years following Disney's death. Other visionary projects, like Brasilia, had shown that utopian concepts often fail when brought into the real world (129). The idea of an experimental prototype community was thus shrunken down to a showcase for modern technology: EPCOT – Center. But the idea of a town did not die. In 1995 the first houses of the Disney-owned town Celebration were sold to high demand (Wilson, 01A). People moving into Celebration were attracted by the Disney-image and the promises surrounding this new town. "Dissatisfaction with traditional cities and suburbs led residents to move to Celebration, Florida. [...] Perhaps most important, Celebration was designed for pedestrians rather than automobiles with the hope that through increased face to face contact a stronger community would develop" (Fotsch, 783)

The main similarity between Celebration and EPCOT is probably the number of inhabitants. EPCOT was planned for a community of 20,000 people, a number that is also targeted for Celebration (Mannheim, 136). Only a part of EPCOT was however dedicated to residential areas. The other parts, like airport and industrial areas have been left out in Celebration. Werner Weiss explains this reduction of the plans: "People's attitudes towards urban design and architecture have changed greatly between the 1960's and the 1990's, from a social, aesthetic, and functional viewpoint. In the 1960's, a town with a megastructure core surrounded by cookie-cutter housing seemed like a great idea" (qtd. on Waltopia). Most important for the success of Celebration is, however, a different aspect of Disney's concept: the combination of old-style traditional housing with the comfort of modern technology. Celebration has an intranet with bulletin boards and chat rooms (Celebration Company). Its school offers the latest methods in education and every inhabitant is provided with up-to-date health-care. Although the managers of Celebration claim that everybody can come and live in

Celebration, access is limited by the prices for real estate. Andrew Ross estimates that houses and apartments in Celebration cost 35 percent more than average (35). A person working in nearby Walt Disney World could not raise the money to move into Celebration like Walt Disney had once aspired.

Although the urban shape of Celebration is also based on the concept of radiating belts around a commercial center and transport that is pedestrianised, these similarities can rather be contributed to urban planning ideals of the early 90s. The core-idea of EPCOT – to build a town where people live happily together in an environment that embraced new technology – has however outlived the decades. To rebuild the romantic ideal of a place dating back to older and better days while providing it with the comfort of new technologies has proved to be a stroke of genius. Although there have been problems with poor construction of the houses (Ross. 36-44) and the school (Ross, 144-65), Celebration's citizens have little critique for their town. Ross points out that "Celebration stands out as the largest successful development of its type dedicated to year-round residents" (qtd. in Fotsch, 783).

Steve Mannheim regrets that the prototype character of EPCOT has been lost in Celebration (136). Celebration was planned as a complete project excluding the possibility of continuous development. Even so, Celebration serves as prototype in a different way. Celebration enjoys great public interest for being owned by the Disney Company. Since there is little to be said against the success of this project, it has been adopted by the movement of the New Urbanism and is used as a figurehead by them.

The Congress for the New Urbanism promotes the exact same aims that were responsible for the success of Celebration: the combination of traditional building-styles and urban forms with modern technology (CNU). It is a world-wide organization that was founded in 1993 as a reaction to the problems of the cities. (Their first developments were, however, opened after the completion of Celebration.) Although the ideas of New Urbanism were probably not directly influenced by Disney, the solution is very similar. Related urban developments can be found in American New Urbanist towns like Seaside, FL; Austin Ranch, TX; but also in European developments like the "Fonti de Matilde" in Italy or the planned "Quartier am Tacheles" in Berlin, Germany. All these projects are praised by the public as well as by professionals. There are, of course, also critical voices regarding New Urbanist developments but these are seldomly proved by experience with established projects.

When Walt Disney first presented his idea it was celebrated as a visionary solution to the problems of modern cities. The prototype character was one of the most important traits of EPCOT. Other main parts of the concept were the radial plan with its commercial center

serving as the focal element, the generous contribution of green space and the traditional neighbourhoods provided with the latest technology. When looking at the plans and drawings of that time from the perspective of today they seem to be the high-strung dreams of a utopian that could never have been realised. But when looking at the direct descendant of these plans, Celebration, some similarities can be found. Celebration is also based on the idea of combining traditional neighbourhood-architecture with modern technology. And – while this was no intended aim of the project – it also serves as prototype. Its ideas are being used and promoted by the Congress for the New Urbanism, which sees these ideas as possible solutions also to modern problems of the cities. Utopian ideas are often unrealistic. Utopian concepts that were realised have often shown how these concepts cannot meet the demands of reality. There are, however, often parts of such an idea that fulfil the promise of the whole. Utopian ideas, even by unlikely persons like Walt Disney, are therefore always worth a closer look.

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