

# City as Theme Park: The Mickeynization of the Urban Landscape

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... the frantic desire for the Almost Real arises only as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories; the Absolute Fake is offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

There is a curious phenomenon creeping into the urban landscape north of the 49th parallel: Tuscan villages are appearing on the prairie, Spanish town squares are selling car washes and donuts, a simulacrum of the Roman Colosseum is posing as a public library. The built environment is being co-opted by elements of the private sector as one large marketing tool for the consumption of everything from shoes to houses. This is not new, historically speaking. What is new, however, is the attempt at verisimilitude. This is not mere revivalism: this is entertainment.

In 1972, Robert Venturi, et al, documented and analyzed the development of "a new type of urban form emerging in America and Europe," namely, the commercial strip. One year later an Italian semiotician, Umberto Eco, visited America and documented his experiences of wax museums, Ripley's Believe it or Not, the Palace of Living Arts and Disneyland in his "Travels in Hyper-Reality." In 1995, Disney chairman Michael Eisner is acknowledged as the "leader of today's enlightened [architectural] patronage,"<sup>3</sup> employing the world's best "serious" architects to design "entertainment architecture." There is almost a straight line leading from the theme restaurants of the strip through the simulacra of *Hyper-Reality* to the Hotel Cheyenne of Euro Disney and on into mainstream architecture.

It is primarily through the influence of buildings designed for Disney, particularly those "outside the gates,"<sup>4</sup> that the phenomenon of "entertainment architecture" has moved beyond the numerically and geographically isolated examples described by Eco. In the intervening twenty-two years, the Almost Real has crept beyond the strip and the tourist landscape and is making its way into suburbia and the downtown, into the mainstream of built culture. This is not building-as-sign, as embodied by the Tail-0-the-Pup and the Brown Derby restaurants in Los Angeles. What began with

Michael Eisner's dream of the total Disney experience has gradually been leading to an unconscious acceptance by the public of theme buildings throughout the urban landscape.

No one is surprised any longer to discover a shopping mall designed as a replication of a European city street, or an entire suburb designed to resemble a quaint, nineteenth century New England town in the middle of the twentieth century prairie. It is not a coincidence that Michael Sorkin's 1992 collection of essays discussing the present condition of American cities is entitled, "Variations on a Theme Park." Although dealing with other forms of urban mutation, the direction which is charted through these essays is clear: something odd is happening within North American cities, and the long-term implications for architecture are unclear.

Is the pursuit of meaning slowly being supplanted by the provision of entertainment as the basis for the development of architecture? Through the examination of three examples, this inquiry posits questions regarding the apparent transformation of our cities into simulacra of the theme park experience, particularly the question of the use of entertainment as a generator of architecture.

## THE MALL THAT ATE DOWNTOWN

Although billed through its promotional material as the "eighth wonder of the world" and "the most complete tourist attraction in the Universe,"<sup>5</sup> the West Edmonton Mall is, first and foremost, a mall. But what a mall it is. Occupying forty-eight square city blocks, the equivalent of 115 football fields, the West Edmonton Mall contains: the world's largest indoor golf course, the world's largest indoor wave pool, a dolphin pool, the only landlocked full-size replica of the *Santa Maria*, a skating rink where the Edmonton Oilers practice, the world's largest indoor amusement park, and four operable submarines (the Canadian Navy has only three). In his architectural review of the mall, Peter Hemingway has written, "It has no sense of scale and, unlike Notre Dame, no sense of architecture. Yet, it has an undeniable attraction, as thousands of visitors prove each day."<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the long list of attractions, the mall does have stores, almost 1,000 of them. Most of these retail outlets are rather mundane replications of the dozens of chain stores found within any other mall in North America. Strung between eleven major department stores, few of these stores offer anything out of the ordinary. Within the miles of the mall, however, there is an interesting hybrid of "attraction" and "commercial outlet" to be found in two distinctly designed areas: Europa Boulevard and Bourbon Street.

Europa Boulevard is a rather well done version of a Paris street, containing the most expensive shops to found in the mall. The street is lined on both sides with various "buildings" of four to five stories, complete with the appearance of residential upper floors<sup>7</sup> and, in some cases, the typical Paris mansard roof. Although rendered only in different colors of stucco and nothing more "real", such as stone, the streetscape is beautifully detailed and convincingly presented. Adding to the illusion of shopping in Paris or London are massive skylights above which give a rather true impression of being in a nineteenth century shopping arcade. What is not true, of course, is that this street is inside a mall; it is a sanitized version of a real city street. This street is never dirty, there are no unpleasant surprises to be found around the corner, you will never be bothered by a panhandler. To some shoppers, this is paradise. What could be better than having the experience of shopping in Europe without the inconvenience of actually having to go there?

Bourbon Street offers another opportunity to experience travel while staying in the same place. A simulacrum of a New Orleans street at dusk, Bourbon Street is filled with restaurants and nightclubs which serve Louisiana fare and sparkle well into the night. Designed around a square of fountains and statuary, the structures within this enclave are wrapped by the ornate metal balconies typically found in the French Quarter of New Orleans. To add to the experience of roaming through what may be a seamier part of the city, the balconies are home to a permanent cast of mannequins, dressed appropriately as male and female figures of the night, permanently posed and adding "life" to the scene. Stars twinkle above the lamp-lit streets, figures hover in the shadows, music and food flow. The actual time of day is irrelevant here; enjoyment and fantasy are what is important. Umberto Eco would feel a certain sense of familiarity.

Completed in 1986, the West Edmonton Mall continues to attract thousands of visitors each day. The attractions do not change, but they do attract. So, just what is the attraction? Peter Hemingway concludes his review with the observation that,

By architectural standards, it is vulgar, crass and fey, but it does seem to strike a chord with visitors. What a world away from the spartan Miesian interiors that we accepted as sacred in the 1950's. Here, McLuhan and Venturi come to life in the most unlikely venue - solid, sensible, hockey-loving Edmonton. Something else is happening here that architects have not yet accepted, let alone understood.<sup>8</sup>

## OUR TOWN

The progeny of the theme park shopping experience has begun to appear on the periphery of North American cities. As an apparently logical extension of the success of Disney-esque shopping, "themed" suburbs are designed so as to provide a particular "experience". The range in delivery and sophistication of these developments is vast, beginning with the evocation of the experience simply through the name of the suburb and culminating in the complete recreation of a specific time and place. The source material for these suburbs is often to be found in the nostalgic yearnings of the generation which grew up with the simple and straightforward worlds of Beaver Cleaver and John Wayne, worlds in which families were happily intact and the good guy always won.

The vision of the "good life" which is to be found in the television and movies of thirty or more years ago is so vivid, in fact, that some residential developers are turning directly to the source for design inspiration. The production designer for the live-action half of "Who Framed Roger Rabbit," William McAllister, was hired to design an entire town as a cross between the streets found in "Leave it to Beaver" and the town square of "Back to the Future," itself a reproduction of the square in "To Kill a Mockingbird." Another community designed by McAllister, to be located in the foothills near Route 66 east of Los Angeles, is a real-life version of the archetypal small town of the old west. "We scripted it, from the emotional content, right from the breakfast table, from the coffee cup. We created a whole history for the town."<sup>9</sup> This includes disguising the water-processing plant for the town as the "factory" which the town grew up around. Everything is included to ensure that the experience is complete, it would seem, except for costumed extras wandering the streets.

A recent development in Calgary takes as its source the sleepy New England town of the nineteenth century and the simplicity of a Norman Rockwell painting. The promotional material for the new McKenzie Towne advertises a place to live which delivers "the past perfected," a town which "has been generations in the making, for generations to come."<sup>10</sup> Developed and designed in conjunction with Andre Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk as an alternative to car-oriented, soul-less suburbs, McKenzie Towne does, indeed, deliver.

The simple knowledge that it exists does not adequately prepare one for the sensation of encountering New England on the prairie. Set in the middle of flat farmland, fifteen miles from the center of the city, McKenzie Towne rises fully formed, ready for the simpler life. The first of the planned fourteen neighborhoods of the Towne is organized around the quintessential small town square, dominated, of course, by a brick-clad clock tower<sup>11</sup>. The buildings which form the edges of the square are three-storied, brick "Georgian" townhouses and colonial "manor" houses which contain apartments. Meticulously detailed and beautifully built, these structures are so perfect that the first thought that

springs to mind is that Disney would be proud. This is "calculated manipulation of architectural sentiment so well done that one is willingly swept up in its game."<sup>12</sup> Whatever one's views of architectural historicism, this is an experience to indulge in.

Although the flavor of the square is unmistakably New England, the architectural styles found along the radiating streets are an historic and geographic jumble. Ranging from accurately reproduced houses of Arts and Crafts style to New England saltboxes and miniature Georgian manor houses, there is a "home for everyone," as advertised. Walking through these streets is reminiscent of wandering through Heritage Park, a local recreation of an old town comprised of authentic historic structures. The intent of the Park is to provide a "living museum", to allow the visitor a glimpse into the past, to bring history to life through a functioning town. Unlike Heritage Park, however, which is clearly representational, past and present are blurred in McKenzie Towne. New houses are dressed in old clothes and placed within the urban fabric of another time and place. Besides the fact that everything here is new, the primary difference between Heritage Park and McKenzie Towne is that you can purchase the houses and live in them. Otherwise, the illusion is complete.

The most common public reaction to McKenzie Towne, according to the sales agents is, "It's so *real!*" The irony of this is lost on the realtors, as they earnestly endeavor to sell the past to a populace eager for something "real". The design response to this desire forms the underpinnings of developments like McKenzie Towne. The primary assumption in the planning and design of this and similar developments is that the relationship between urban fabric and human behavior is causal. If we provide the kind of town which we had when life was simpler and better, when it was "real", then our lives will also be simpler and better. Our streets will be safer, our neighbors will be friendlier, we will sit on our front porches and enjoy life. This assumption exploits the desire to be elsewhere, both in a temporal and a social sense. The provision of the experience of being in another place and time is the provision of diversion. It is also the very essence of entertainment.

### TO BE OR NOT TO BE: A COLOSSAL QUESTION

The citizens of Vancouver are presently being entertained by their recently opened public library. Occupying an entire downtown city block, this vast complex includes the new central library and an office tower, and is, at \$125 million, the most expensive project undertaken by the city to date. In addition to providing Vancouver with much needed new library facilities, the intent of the new complex was to provide a symbol of the city, to produce the "most important civic facility in the downtown core".<sup>13</sup>

Chosen through a limited competition which involved a technical advisory committee, the city's urban design panel, and a month of public consultation, the winning scheme by

Moshe Safdie and partners garnered the support of 70 percent of the more than 7,000 public ballots cast. Although the Selection Advisory Committee's report claimed that all three components of the competition were considered, the Safdie scheme fell seriously short in the areas of functional program and overall budget. This left observers to speculate on the role that the public played in choosing the winning design. "How much influence the public survey had on the jury," Bronwen Ledger of Canadian Architect notes, "we can only guess, remembering that the mayor himself was the chairman."<sup>14</sup>

Three finalists were chosen from a field of twenty-eight firms which responded to invitations for expressions of interest. In addition to Moshe Safdie, the schemes of Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg of Toronto and Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer of New York were chosen and displayed for public viewing at various sites around the city. While both KPMB and HHP presented schemes that were clearly modernist, Safdie presented his version of Rome's colosseum. The public responded overwhelmingly in favor of Safdie's scheme, with comments such as, "only design that is interesting," "most memorable and different," "emotional appeal," and "exciting."<sup>15</sup> The Selection Advisory Committee also endorsed the project, "noting its 'strength and boldness of concept' and saying it had the potential to become a great piece of public architecture."<sup>16</sup> Of course, they enjoy the benefit of hindsight. The first version of the colosseum has been rather successful in this regard, so why would Vancouver's version not also become a great piece of public architecture?

The critics were not so kind, saying that the scheme "falls somewhere between a joke and a folly," and pointed out that Vancouver is not "Wallyworld".<sup>18</sup> While the public was adoring the new design and the critics were lambasting it, Safdie himself insisted that the colosseum had not been used as a reference. He claimed to be "amused"<sup>19</sup> that anyone should see the Roman in his design. This was remarkable, as Bronwen Ledger points out,

...the resemblance was immediately obvious to everyone else: same arcaded passages around the double-wall perimeter, same colonnaded facade of four tiers. Even the way the wall folds up into the office tower recalls the slope of the ruined walls of the original.<sup>20</sup>

It is rather odd that the architect persists in denying the primary reason for the strong reaction, positive and negative, which his design has provoked. It would seem that it is precisely the resemblance to the Roman colosseum which people have responded to. The pressing question which emerges from this event, then, is: why?

Vancouver architect Peter Busby, as a member of one of the second-stage teams, has studied both the program and the final schemes in detail, and claims that Safdie's design is the only one of the three to adequately address pedestrian access and presence on the surrounding streets.<sup>21</sup> Given the public's traditional response to the urban qualities of modernist

designs, this may be true. However, a public appreciation of pedestrian-friendliness does not, in itself, adequately account for the extreme popularity of the scheme. The answer must be sought elsewhere. Miro Cernetig of the Globe and Mail visited the library shortly after its opening and wrote:

Most people who first stumble upon the library can't help but gaze in wonder. The building is so different from anything else in the city, it elicits the same sort of awe you feel in Las Vegas when your bus pulls up to the door of the Luxor, the casino hotel that has also borrowed from antiquity by shaping itself like the Great Pyramid, with a giant sphinx posted at the entrance... Passersby occasionally remark that the building belongs in a theme park - or Rome.<sup>22</sup>

Coupled with the public's comments during the review process, these comparisons to Las Vegas and theme parks are revealing. Why should this re-vamped colosseum provoke such a powerfully emotional response? Could it be this resemblance to themed spectacles which has caught the imagination of the public? As both thrilling and familiar, the new colosseum has been enthusiastically embraced by the populace. In the June, 1995 issue of Vancouver magazine, David Beers has speculated that this is due to the fact that, "Vancouver is a young city to begin with, and it has bulldozed away most of the older parts, so we leaped at [Mr. Safdie's] chance to fabricate the feel of history..."<sup>23</sup> In fact, the new Vancouver Library goes further than the feel of history: it replicates it.

In the same way that the West Edmonton Mall provides the opportunity to visit Europe while still only at the mall, or McKenzie Towne offers the potential to experience small town living of another time and place, the Vancouver Library offers the people of that city the chance to visit ancient Rome without leaving home, to have a piece of that great city within their own. The opportunity of experiencing the novelty of having a full-scale version of a world-famous building must also be a factor in this scheme's popularity. As Christopher Hume of the Toronto Star has written:

But, of course, this is Vancouver, where architecture ranks as a form of popular entertainment. The idea of a library as a colosseum might strike some as bizarre, but not in the province that would be California. Safdie's design bears no relation to its site, to Vancouver, to the idea of a library, or anything else that matters. What it does do is engage the audience and the residents of Vancouver at the level of spectacle. It is a fill-dress historical movie. We know it's not real, but that's not the issue. The important thing is that it should be fun, a *fantasy*.<sup>24</sup>

Is the desire for fun, fantasy, and entertainment now becoming a major force behind architecture? As the three examples cited here illustrate, the phenomenon of themed buildings is increasing both in frequency and scope. We are no longer merely *looking* at the occasional restaurant along

the strip, but at entire developments designed to impart a particular experience. The phenomenon is apparently being fed by the public response which greets each new development and, in fact, would appear to be a direct response to public demand. What does this mean? Does architecture have meaning anymore, or is it viewed as merely another mode of delivering entertainment?

## THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

Late in the twentieth century the desire for, and the provision of entertainment is pervasive, leading to an explosion in the modes of delivery. Virtually every sector within society is responding in some way to the public's undeniably positive reaction to entertainment. In direct response to a new generation which has been raised in an entertainment culture, museums are in the process of metamorphosing from quiet, contemplative places of learning to noisy environments of messy vitality which entertain as they educate. Terms such as "edutainment" and "infotainment" are appearing with increasing regularity when education is discussed. "Entertainment retail" is the latest development in the world of shopping and, apparently, is "the most significant breakthrough of the Nineties."<sup>25</sup> Ranging from electronics playgrounds to stores designed as movie sets, these new retail outlets do not merely sell tangible objects: they sell fantasy.

"The entertainment industry is now the driving force for new technology, as defense used to be. Making a dinosaur for 'Jurassic Park' is exactly the same as designing a car,"<sup>26</sup> says Edward McCracken, the CEO of Silicon Graphics, effectively blurring the distinction between the tangible object and the virtual image. As Maria Bartolucci wrote last year in Metropolis:

The fact that these kinds of distinctions are not being made says a great deal about the revolution now under way. For in truth, the shift taking place in America is not just from an economy based on entertainment, but to an entertainment-based culture and *society*.<sup>27</sup>

This is perhaps most sharply highlighted by the proliferation of the "tabloid news" shows on television. Although packaged to sell "straight" news and "entertainment" news, the blurring between these two realms is now so complete that both types of news are frequently reported on both types of shows. Nowhere has this crossover been more evident than in the coverage of the O.J. Simpson double murder trial. Covered equally by all types of news shows, the televised trial was watched by millions and became the most memorable television event of recent times. Events such as the Simpson trial, the Gulf War and the aftermath of the Oklahoma bombing have maintained television viewing audiences which the producers of prime time would envy. The treatment of news as entertainment and entertainment as news has reached truly bizarre proportions, and yet appears to pass unnoticed. Everything is

entertainment, it would seem.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

Architecture has a long history of servitude to society's desires and ambitions, reaching from the pharaohs to the fascists and beyond. Although taking many forms, the same mechanism has consistently been employed: the physical embodiment of symbol for the communication and representation of ideas. As more than merely the product of physical concerns, architecture has historically been a physical representation and manifestation of cultural experience. As such, architecture never exists in isolation from society's other forms of cultural expression and has long served as an index of cultural condition.

At present, there are severe seismic disturbances occurring within the relationship between commerce and culture and they are becoming visible through the design of the built environment. Within the context of a culture increasingly preoccupied with the provision of entertainment, the apparent replacement of ideas with "experiences" as the generating force behind architecture can not be entirely surprising, only deeply disturbing. But is there a crisis occurring within architecture? Is our traditional idea of the representation of meaning in architecture really being replaced by entertainment?

This would appear to be the case initially, but a sideways look at the situation provides the potential for an alternative explanation. The possibility exists that it is precisely "entertainment", or, the provision of diversional experiences, which is presently meaningful to society. This desire to be elsewhere, this search for experiences of other places, other times may, in fact, be the defining characteristic of who we are, here and now. Therefore, one may conclude that meaning is *not* being replaced by entertainment, only that entertainment has become meaningful. Perhaps this is where the crisis lies. As Neil Postman has written,

Today we must look to the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, as a metaphor of our national character and aspiration, its symbol a thirty-foot-high cardboard picture of a slot machine and a chorus girl. For Las Vegas is a city entirely devoted to the idea of entertainment, and as such proclaims the spirit of a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment. Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.<sup>28</sup>

This prognosis may not offer much comfort to those concerned about our cultural well-being and what the current situation portends for the future. It is too easy, within the broad architectural community, however, to dismiss entertainment architecture as an aberration; the evidence would indicate otherwise. For architects to abrogate their role within this debate is to disregard an undeniable shift within

society towards experiences which deliver entertainment. To wait for this "hiccup" in the continuum of architectural development to pass is, perhaps, to miss the opportunity to shape it through discussion and participation. At present, there is no indication that the shift towards entertainment will abate. The public will continue to enjoy themed buildings and developers will continue to provide them. Or, to paraphrase the famous quote, I have seen the future, and it looks like a mouse.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Eco, Umberto. (1983, first published 1973). *Travels in Hyper-Reality*. W. Weaver, trans. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p. 30-31.
- <sup>2</sup> Venturi, R., Scott Brown, D. & Izenour, S. (1972) *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, Preface to the first edition.
- <sup>3</sup> Dietsch, D.K. (1992, July) Mickey Goes to Paris. *Architecture*, p. 41.
- <sup>4</sup> Branch, M. (1990, October). Why (and How) Does Disney Do It? *Progressive Architecture*, p. 79.
- <sup>5</sup> Davis, T. (1991, Spring) Theatrical Antecedents of the Mall That Ate Downtown. *Journal of Popular Culture*, p. 1.
- <sup>6</sup> Hemingway, P. (1986, March). The Joy of Kitsch. *Canadian Architect*, p. 33.
- <sup>7</sup> In fact, these upper floors do contain spaces behind the windows, most of which are dental or medical offices.
- <sup>8</sup> Hemingway, P. (1986, March). The Joy of Kitsch. *Canadian Architect*, p. 34.
- <sup>9</sup> Patton, P. (1992, November). It's a Wonderful Lifestyle. *Esquire*, p. 59.
- <sup>10</sup> McKenzie Towne sales brochure, 1995.
- <sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that, although designed to resemble the steeples found on New England churches, this clock-tower sits above the only commercial building in the neighborhood. In fact, there is not a church in sight, and no mention of churches planned for the future.
- <sup>12</sup> Goldberger, P. (1990, November). In Beverly Hills, a Theme Park for Rich Adults. *New York Times*, p. H6.
- <sup>13</sup> Ledger, B. (1992, July). Vancouver Library Square Competition: A Public Affair. *The Canadian Architect*, p. 20.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.
- <sup>16</sup> Dafoe, C. (1992, April 15). Vancouver's Library Square Goes to Saffdie: Proposal Evokes Roman Colosseum. *Vancouver Sun*, p. C1.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, Quote by Adele Freedman of the Globe and Mail, p. C1.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. C1.
- <sup>19</sup> Wilson, P. (1992, April 18). High-tech, Futuristic, Comfy and Familiar. *Vancouver Sun*, p. B9.
- <sup>20</sup> Ledger, B. (1992, July). Vancouver Library Square Competition: A Public Affair. *The Canadian Architect*, p. 20.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.
- <sup>22</sup> Cemetic, M. (1995, June 1). World-Class Building or Roman Knock-Off! *The Globe and Mail*, p. A2.
- <sup>23</sup> Quoted in Cemetic, p. A2.
- <sup>24</sup> Hume, C. (1992, April 16). Saffdie's Newest Project an Arena for Literature. *Toronto Star*, p. B7.
- <sup>25</sup> Biggs, M. (1994, December). Volume. *Metropolis*, p. 72.
- <sup>26</sup> as quoted in Bartolucci, M. (1994, December). Remote Control. *Metropolis*, p. 62.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 62.
- <sup>28</sup> Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. New York: Penguin Books, p. 4.