

## READING URBAN INSCRIPTIONS:

Discovering Resistant Practices

### The Harlequin Dress of Architecture

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I would like to begin this paper by a seemingly simple question: how is it possible that despite an ever increasing complexity of contemporary culture(s), despite the extreme miniaturization and proliferation of digital (information) technology which supposedly democratizes civic realm, urban architecture is simplified, dishonored, and reduced to decorum whose purpose is the simulation of civic, urban experience? I would like to assert that ever since the separation of L'Ecole des Ponts et Chaussees from L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, it has been a common notion that architects have become, in Michel Foucault's words, "no longer the engineers of the three great variables: territory, information, and speed."<sup>1</sup> If one accepts this to be true, what exactly is than the role of the architect in the "information age," which by definition escapes the domain of architecture? In the late 1980's, celebratory statements, such as those of Paul Virilio, proclaimed that "today the image has already become material of the architectural conception, tomorrow it will be the material of architecture itself, far beyond an anecdotic time to come such as that of showcase or the architecture of cinema halls; images produce architecture, no longer in a metaphorical, but rather a constructive way."<sup>2</sup> Not only that such prospects have been far fetched, but they also seem ironic when one looks today at Times Square or Las Vegas, for instance. At about the same time, in 1991, Peter Hall anticipated that the "industrial city of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century will rapidly become an artifact from the past, to be visited in the form of an open-air museum like New York's South Street Seaport or the Rocks district of Sydney."<sup>3</sup> It is in the fissure between these two statements that I would like to position my argument; namely, it is in between the fabrication of "the image," and the process of "disneyfication" of cities, both of which have been the contrasting synonyms for information age in architectural discourses of the 1980's and 1990's, that I would like to develop my discourse today.

In *Space, Time, and Architecture* of 1949, Sigfried Giedion makes note of the term "Harlequin dress of architecture," a term that was frequently used during the 19th-century to denote a process that

"reduced the revived forms of serious architecture to the status of false fronts." Giedion employed it in reference to the separation of facade from the structural system of the building caused by the development and proliferation of cast-iron construction, as it was obvious in Jules Saulnier's Chocolate Factory in Noisiel-sur-Marne of 1871.<sup>4</sup> I am employing this term here as a metaphor related to the separation of the apparatus of representation from the realm of the building (structure, program, etc). In other words, I would like to investigate both the notion of architecture as a mode of representation that configures the experience of civility, and that of architecture as a method of production of the civic realm as a whole.

In what follows I would like to speak first of an ironic relationship between amusement installations and cities, and identify what lies behind the phenomenon called "the theme park model." Subsequently, I will attempt to recognize and analyze the process of expansion of the theme park model beyond the strict boundaries of theme parks (a process usually called "disneyfication"), its consequent imposition upon cities, and the image-making that it implies. Finally, I would like to speak of the implications of all the above processes on the transformation of public space, the civic realm, and of possibilities of architecture to either "resist" or take part in such transformations.

Since the 17th-century public walks that transgressed the boundaries of European medieval fortifications in search for amusement, amusement installations have always maintained a dialectical relationship to the city center and related traffic networks. Early amusement parks and contemporary theme parks were made possible by the development of modern traffic networks and the modern timetable that, together with the spatial zoning, have assigned programs to specific space-time locales. The first ones were placed at the end of tramlines in order to stimulate commuting on weekends and holidays. Analogically, within the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century metropolitan model of urban expansion, cities -as cultural, social and political centers- had always determined the peripheral character of amusement practices and amusement installations. Within the contemporary megapolitan model -where the distribution of goods, people, and financial wealth recognizes no difference in cultural detail- amusement installations and city centers are just nodes of different degree of accumulation, of both people and wealth. In such a situation, we

face a complex set of relationships between the previously distinct entities of the *city* and the *theme park*.

The first theme park, Disneyland, was conceived neither as a city, nor as a replica of an existing urban model, although Disneyland was a nostalgic re-invention of Disney's native Marceline, Missouri. Foremost, Disneyland was conceived as an antidote to, and a rejection of, the East-coast industrial metropolis, such as New York City. However, Disneyland was an attempt to re-create a sense of place, not a city, as an antidote to the "decadency" of the American metropolis. An attempt to create a place where people can walk safely, meet only the same type of people, and above all ecstatically consume while learning about ever latent promises of the American entrepreneurship. This was clearly an antidote for the pedestrian of Manhattan who was, in Disney's view, afraid, alienated and foremost unable to consume freely. Coney Island, Manhattan's paradise ground, was in Walt Disney's view a "defective, poorly planned, conventional amusement park"<sup>5</sup> that he inevitably intended to contrast. Since the latter had played a major role in the creation of metropolitan lifestyles, the metropolitan sensibility of Manhattan, it is not a coincidence that Walt Disney has repeatedly referred to this pair in order to make his point appealing: to Coney Island as an archaic type of amusement park and to Manhattan as a "malaise" he wanted to oppose. Therefore, the rejection of the prevailing (metropolitan) model of urban development has been embedded in the very creation of theme parks.

Disneyland turned out to be a successful business venture, due mostly to the pioneering tripartite spatial extension patented by Walt Disney: it was at the same time a material environment in a geographic locale, it was also a fictitious space of Disney films, and as a media (television) space it extended its domain to millions of households nationwide. Upon realizing the full potential of this invention, and upon accumulating the financial means by early 1960's, the ambition was born to make a City based on the experience of Disneyland. Walt Disney decided to build the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT) as a part of the Walt Disney World complex in Florida. Although EPCOT was never built as a city, this project symbolically marks the beginning of an era in which parallels between theme parks and cities will often be made.

Early critical writings on Disneyland and its meaning(s), such as those of Charles Moore or Peter Blake, had indeed made the connection between theme parks and cities possible, although they had not perceived neither Disneyland, nor Epcot, as a new type of city. They referred instead to the lessons that architects and city planners could have learned from Disneyland, not in operational terms as to 'how to make' a contemporary city, as it was about understanding the structural changes in the character of public spaces and public infrastructure. Consequently, they opened up the field of comparison in two

possible directions: firstly, in terms of the parallels made between the character of public space in Disneyland as opposed to that of the contemporary city; and secondly, in terms of the significance of a sophisticated infrastructure for the proper functioning of the contemporary city.

Peter Blake called both Disneyland and Walt Disney World "a lesson in pedestrianism," and an important accomplishment in terms of urban psychology and urban technology.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, one of the most obvious facts was that in terms of conventional city-planning methods there was nothing new and exciting about Disneyland. After all, Disneyland was not a city. All the fascinating aspects mentioned by Blake, Moore and others would have happened in cities too if cities would have only had the financial resources and a political consensus to do so. What was truly groundbreaking about Disneyland was the fact that it was designed as a conventional movie set. It was designed by filmmakers and set designers, not by architects, and therefore "every step was planned and every view framed." As Umberto Eco has noticed, "like the Hearst Castle, Disneyland also has no transitional spaces; there is always something to see, the great voids of modern architecture and city planning are unknown here."<sup>7</sup> In terms of design, Disneyland had introduced the symbiosis of the design of procession and performance with the design of the material environment, and an immaculate precision with which all could be programmed; the use of color, light, fragrances, pavement-material, background sound, foreground sound and all the other elements that architects of city spaces had forgotten or haven't had a chance to use; the employment of behavioral sciences and environmental psychology, choreography and set-design in determining the previous. Besides zoning, therefore, Disney Imagineers used scores and scripts in order to program the environments. Also, in terms of management, Disneyland had shown that private-sector management of spaces designated for public use could not be compared, unfortunately, with the public-sector one still based in the "public-service idealism." The above planning aspects combined with the austere mechanisms of social control and with entertainment, form the base of a compact and homogeneous conceptual framework that characterize a globally present expansion of the theme park model beyond the boundaries of theme parks.

There has been a continuous attempt from contemporary critics to identify theme park as a "trope for future urban planning,"<sup>8</sup> and the transposition of the planning strategies of theme parks as beneficial for the revival of the dying form of industrial metropolis. Simultaneously, the type of spatial and social control that theme park implies is seen as dangerous and threatening. Edward Soja explained this phenomenon as an expansion of the hyper reality principle "out of the localized enclosures and tightly bounded rationality of the

theme parks.<sup>9</sup> This expansion is best evident in the evolution of downtowns as accelerated by urban tourism. Sharon Zukin understands the transposition of the theme park model as a part of the conceptual framework of “symbolic economy” that fundamentally restructures our cities.<sup>10</sup> She defines symbolic economy as a new economic order based on entertainment, tourism and media industry. Theme park model is usually imposed upon existing urban fabric through a mechanism that entertainment corporations and their planners call “urban entertainment projects.”<sup>11</sup> The basic principle of that mechanism is what they call ‘synergy,’ which to them means “assembling a sufficient critical mass of different opportunities in one location,”<sup>12</sup> or intensifying parts of the city by entertainment opportunities. Mark Gottdiener<sup>13</sup> suggested that the reason for the proliferation of such themed environments and entertainment opportunities lies in the melding of fabricated environmental themes with the world of mass-media, giant entertainment corporations, and control of consumer fantasies: all pioneered, to a large extent, by Walt Disney.

The imposition of theme park model commonly shows inclinations towards various forms of symbiosis with conventional ‘urban (re)development projects,’ but it has also been naturalized as the way to reconstruct cities. This type of restructuring happened in various cities as a consequence of different factors, mostly economic ones. In 1980’s, when corporations gave up the previously dominant ideal of having a glass box in the very core of the city as their representational *tour de force*, and consequently moved their operations to suburbs, city centers remained virtually empty. In the early 1990’s City Governments offered tax-concessions and various other incentives to businesses willing to come back to the cities and revitalize the dying downtowns. The first to move back was the so-called “culture industry,” comprised of entertainment corporations. Much of the culture industry today colonizes city spaces through the diversion of funding from inner-city slums to entertainment-based substitutions and theme-based reconstructions. Universal Studios’ City Walk in Los Angeles is a case in point. Recent Disney Co.’s projects for the transformation of Manhattan’s Times Square into entertainment area, with all the idiosyncratic features of theme parks, is yet another example. The importance of these examples is in the fact that, as in Times Square, one no longer speaks of the Mall of America, Las Vegas, and other places that one visits when one wants to; these projects reconstruct places where the traces of the generations behind are clearly imprinted onto the pavement, but also places where our daily trajectories converge into a communal pattern of daily life.

More importantly, such reconstructions also redefine four fundamental dimensions of public space: ownership, accessibility patterns, degrees of enclosure, and the purpose of public space. They in fact de-contextualize civility. In general, the following four character-

istics are the main reasons for the bureaucratic support for the imposition of the theme park model: promising tax revenues; the type of ‘order’ over public spaces that it implies; new jobs generated in construction, service and entertainment industries; and the reconstruction of the city’s problematic areas into a proper “image of civility.” Total control over public space and entertainment, are among the most indisputable features of this model and thus most objected to. While most critics would agree with Neil Postman that entertainment has become the natural format for the representation of all human experience, and that popular entertainment has always been one of the basic dimensions of urbanity, total control over public space is still the *terra incognita* of contemporary liberal democracies. The public-realm discourse seems to be centered on the question: “Is it still public if we have to pay for it?”<sup>14</sup> This, however, is not the right question. The real question is: “Can freedom, as a complex ensemble of social practices, be exercised in a public environment totally controlled by private interest?”

If one assumes that public spaces, such as Times Square, figure as the principal part of the civic realm in the sense in which Hannah Arendt,<sup>15</sup> for instance, would have perceived them, and therefore as a part of “political arena” composed of “equals who are different,” than theme parks strongly refuse the “social conflict” and offer militant strategies for gentrification and class seclusion. They offer what Sharon Zukin has called a “vision of civility bounded by consumption.”<sup>16</sup> The question that comes to mind is whether this *nouveau* civility has to be protected by gates, entrance-fees and private security forces in an obvious attempt at combining general access with social control. However, as Mark Gottdiener has noted, when high crime threatens enjoyment of public spaces in the cities, whoever their owner is, theme park model becomes a “desirable substitute for urban experience.”<sup>17</sup> Ironically, what Walt Disney proposed was the suburban image of ‘desirable urbanity’ as materialized by Disneyland, ‘good’ urbanity as seen from suburbia: clean, predictable, safe. That particular image of urbanity has an aggressive agenda of its own, an agenda based in middle class, suburban values. Its agenda is, strictly speaking, political in nature. Seen from the suburban position, ‘urbanity’ is indeed possible as a chain of private experiences, a succession of controlled private spaces, because public space has traditionally been excluded from the suburban domain. Seen from a truly ‘civic’ position though, such urbanity, and such a vision of civility, are simply not possible. Unless, one either redefines the meanings of these terms, or anew etymologically and rhetorically defines the hybrid forms of development that occur when such an image of ‘urbanity’ is imposed onto cities.

It is still unknown how reconstructed downtowns can be planned in order to assure the supreme economic efficiency that is otherwise

easily achieved within the territorial confinements of traditional theme parks. According to Disney's chief-architect Robert Stern, Michael Eisner, the CEO of Walt Disney Co., advised the Times Square design team when they arrived at the moot point with the following words: "Gate the whole street off and take it over!"<sup>18</sup> Unexpectedly low revenues at the Universal Walk in Los Angeles alarmed Disney Co. and other urban-entertainment developers because the enjoyment of city life is not necessarily realized through the act of financial consumption. Since visitors there did not have to pay the entrance fee, they simply enjoyed the city walk in a traditional and almost forgotten ways without spending a penny. Thus, theme-park-ed cities can never be totally equated with traditional theme parks (given they are not gated) because social and spatial practices of 'citizens' are unpredictable.

It is an ironic notion that since the middle-ages mass-amusement and organized, popular leisure installations have always been pushed out of the boundaries of cities. After being truly institutionalized in 1950's by the establishment of theme parks (e.g. Disneyland), they have today come to restructure the very center of what was previously the axis of centrifugal urbanization by virtue of which they were presented as social, cultural, and urban satellites. Walt Disney had exchanged the idea of ephemerality, which has dominated the development of leisure facilities, for the ideas of permanency and durability -ancient architectural metaphors- that have always been the premise of the construction of cities.

These developments must also be placed into a broader framework, not only with contemporary trends in entertainment and urban re-development, but also with the often underestimated tradition of spectacular self-representation and re-invention of cities that originated at World Fairs and Great Exhibitions, as Christine Boyer has proposed; it is since the second half of the 19th-century that architecture and the production of scenographic city-space would offer the spectator a "packagable and consumable manner of looking at cities," within a time-frame programmed and planned for commercial advantage.<sup>19</sup>

As a way of conclusion, I will focus on the two specific aspects of the civic realm where I see the influence of Disneyfication as most relevant and possibly challenging: representation and public participation.

We commonly think that architecture was once upon the time in a position to define and 'represent society,' its culture, its history, and the physical relationships between its individuals; such a role was supposedly assured by perceptual conventions of mimetic representation and by the principle of iconic referentiality. The relevance of contemporary critical theory to architecture has been clear in arguing that the electronic media have replaced architecture as the

mode of representation that defines the dimensions of human experience in the information age. The atmosphere of critical thinking and public debate, fostered by the civic institutions housed in the places of monumental architecture, is dissipating due to the degrading processes of commodity culture. Such arguments are based on the idea that every culture has a system of values which will bring the balance of forces between technology, formal systems, and use into some form of disciplined order which serves the purpose for which a public building was brought into being. If one steps away from the ideas that architecture, by definition, is the fundamental mode of production of civic space, and that there is such a thing as a coherent system of social and cultural values that architecture is supposed to represent, one necessarily comes to search for an alternative system of values that are either native to the discipline of architecture (as a form of resistance), or those that are opportunistically waiting to be discovered somewhere in the information age. Among the various attempts to do the prior, Kenneth Frampton attempted to reestablish tectonics as such a system, and to discuss constructional language as a means of representation of public buildings. Traditionally, the expression of construction and material value has been a means to signify our shared cultural and social values, by revealing the ontological nature of the public institution and the civic realm as a whole. The paradox is that architecture today attempts to appeal to an audience waiting for the restoration of the visual codes of recognizability, for the reinstatement of figuration. Since sources of such imagery are mostly fictional narratives created by the world of media, information-age architecture has become much more about either showing memories of events that took place elsewhere, visualizing the immaterial world of media, or just transmitting information. To different degrees, both the main stream architecture and the Disney Imagineers are working under this premise. How to make a physical building out of such images, such virtual experiences, and empty signifiers seems wrongly to be the question that architecture is facing today. If we look carefully at Disneyfication as a conceptual model, we will see that it does not propose the act of representation as a reflective/mimetic procedure of what exists in 'reality,' but as a constitutive part of 'reality.' Analogically, as Stuart Halls writes, in the information age, representation should no longer be seen as a process of representing meaning "which is already there;" rather, the process of representation should be understood as an act of creating meaning, and it has become a constitutive part of meaning itself. Civic space, thus, could be shaped by representations that are created by arts, media, education and other discursive processes that configure the material and cognitive aspects of civic life. The role of architecture in information age would than be to give structure to notions of civility by spatializing *propositions* for civic life and configuring them into a

matrix of civil relationships, shared civic practices, as opposed to privatized ethnic practices promoted by current processes of Disneyfication. Now, architecture conceived on this level, with its Harlequin Dress on, could arrive to the mode of representation that defines the dimensions of civic experience, even though the experience will not be that of the idealized citizen of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century nation state, and it is definitely not a totalizing one.

Despite all the problems that come together with the theme park model, it has been precisely the populist appeal of mass entertainment and consumption that potentially, just potentially, carries a liberalizing force within the newly conceived civic realm for varied social groups: for women, children, teenagers, people of color, the poor, the old, et al., both as producers and as consumers. One major characteristic of the model of civility proposed by Disneyfication, however, is that civility is based on ethnic communality of origin so characteristic for suburbia, as opposed to the liberal notions of civility based on the free will, voluntary belonging, and free individual action of mixed origins. What than Disneyfication proposes is an enclosed, homogenous spatial system of everything, from the human body to the civic realm as a whole, becoming an object able to be made 'perfect.' In fact, Disneyfication de-contextualizes civility and fabricates it as a mere commodity to be acquired by taking part in its version of the public realm, which of course is mostly immaterial and largely fictive. The role of architecture would be to re-contextualize civility as a product of the free human will, and as a decision to take part in a common physical realm where immediate human activity, and not the consumption of commodities, marks the character of a place. Place-making is thus exactly what must distinguish the work of architecture from results of Disneyfication; moreover, it is exactly the difference between 'place' and 'space' that distinguishes the two modes of production of the civic realm.

I would like to close with Charles Moore's words inspired by his analysis of Disneyland in 1965: "Most effectively, we might, as architects, first seek to develop a vocabulary of forms responsive to a

marvelously complex and varied functions of our society [...] Then we might start sorting out for our special attention those things for which the public has to pay, from which might derive the public life."<sup>20</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Rabinow, P. (Ed.) *Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon, 1984.

<sup>2</sup>Goulet, P. (Ed.) *Jean Nouvel*. Paris: Electa Moniteur, 1987.

<sup>3</sup>Hall, P. (Ed.) *Cities of the 21st Century: New Technologies and Spatial Systems*. New York: Halsted Press, 1991.

<sup>4</sup>Giedion, S. *Space, Time, and Architecture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949: 115.

<sup>5</sup>Findlay, J.M. *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture after 1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992: 63.

<sup>6</sup>Blake, P. "Walt Disney World," *The Architectural Forum*, June (1972): 24-40.

<sup>7</sup>Eco, U. *Travels in Hyper Reality*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1986: 48.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example: Findlay, J.M. *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture after 1940*.

<sup>9</sup>Soja, E. "Inside Exopolis: Scenes from Orange County." In: Sorkin, M. (ed.) *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992: 94-123

<sup>10</sup>Zukin, S. *The Cultures of Cities*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995.

<sup>11</sup>'Urban Land Institute' Seminar: "Urban Entertainment: Lights, Camera, and Now What?" New York, June 3-4, 1996.

<sup>12</sup>Adler J. "Theme Cities," *Newsweek*, September 11 (1995): 68-72.

<sup>13</sup>Gottodiener M. *The Theming of America*. Boulder: Westview Press Inc., 1997: 155.

<sup>14</sup>Branch, M.A. "Why (and How) Does Disney Do It?" *Progressive Architecture*, October (1990): 78-82

<sup>15</sup>Arendt H. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

<sup>16</sup>Zukin, S. *The Cultures of Cities*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995: 55.

<sup>17</sup>Gottodiener M. *The Theming Of America*: 112.

<sup>18</sup>Adler J. "Theme Cities," *Newsweek*, September 11 (1995): 68-72

<sup>19</sup>Boyer, C.M. *The City of Collective Memory: The Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*. Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 1994: 301-302.

<sup>20</sup>Moore, C. "You Have to Pay For the Public Life," *Perspecta* 9/10 (1965): 64-69.