

FROM PROCESS TO BRAND

Post-structuralism Embraced by Themed Environment Designers

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ABSTRACT

Frequently, reductively instrumental architectural theory is dismissed by critical architectural theorists for being too simple, and is cast out of the circle of authorized theoretical work for experimental investigation. Similarly, much of the writings of the post-structuralist linguists is dismissed by academics, although for entirely different reasons. Where reductive work is seen to be problematic because of its transparent and naïve politics, post-structuralist work is seen to be problematic because it appears apolitical and completely dissociated from practice. This essay contends that both of these rejections are themselves the problem, and have allowed theory, because of its marginalization from academic inquiry, to thrive uncriticized in commercial practices where they can have a profound impact on our lived environments. Themed environment design, an important contemporary strain of culturally significant commercial practice, is examined as an in-depth example to reveal the savvy politics of these academically marginalized theories, newly (albeit oddly) embraced by the consumer marketplace.

In 1986, Michel Foucault introduced the concept of governmentality to English-speaking readers with an essay outlining how this historical manifestation of state power survives in the culture of the governmental expert, where power exists in the form of expert knowledge accessible only to those participant in its institutionalization.¹ About ten years later, the Walt Disney Company introduced their concept of environmentality to English-speaking readers, announcing their worldwide initiative to institutionalize sustainable development and energy conservation as a Disney practice for its projects, employees, and communities.² While I give Disney immense credit both for the realization of such an environmentally conscious project and for the strategic coinage of its moniker, I feel obliged to correct them in their application of the name to this particular enterprise. How can I ignore the fortuitous coincidence of Disney's undertaking with that of the illustrious Michel Foucault? The Disney Company, the progenitor

of the immersively themed environment *par excellence*, must truly be seen as an environmentalist not only with regard to the natural environment, but to the socio-spatial environment as well. Their institutionalization of this environment amounts to nothing other than a spatialization of Foucault's notion of governmentality – a strategic 'expertification' of spatial practice used for the ends of spatial control, organization, and commodification.

But Disney's (and its followers' and competitors') theoretical practices do not end with an embrace of Foucault. In fact, a number of thematic ventures in architectural, urban, and landscape design demonstrate similar (although often unwitting) embraces of the theoretical impulses of structuralist and post-structuralist thought. Most particularly, this collaboration seems to be due at least in part to the explicitly narrative spatial mechanisms of theme-based design. The themed environment is by definition a narrative construction; spatial decisions are made in constant coordination with a predefined storyline. These stories are spatialized through logistical planning, spatial organization, and decorative design, and are intended to facilitate a certain kind of narrative legibility, explicitly introducing lexical practices into spatial occupation. This semiotics of space literally and metaphorically induces spatial practices of reading, writing, listening, and enunciation, providing ample opportunity to engage with the semiotic foundations of structuralist and post-structuralist theory. The themers engage Derridean grammatology more effectively than they think.

How? And what right do I have to presume such potential blasphemy? The story begins with environment, or, more specifically, environment product. To begin, compare these two phrases: (1) "the Walt Disney Company is focused on the growth of product this year" and (2) "Michel Foucault created a number of significant textual products during his lifetime." To what is called the mass class of nouns from the concrete class, the word "product" can be seen in popular business parlance to increasingly refer not to a discreet item of production (as in "the company is introducing a new *product* this year") but to a domain or a fluid entity which cannot be seen in any discreet form (consider "milk" or "water"). The entrance of "product" into this linguistic realm suggests that it is increasingly presented as a concept rather than an object, as an entity defined primarily by its maintenance of some level of internal cohesion (its system of pro-

duction, organization, and distribution). The making of product does not require the manufacture of products, but does require the system of commercialization that came from industrial work processes. Product may be merely a good, copyrightable concept ("idea product"), or new artistic production ("content product"). In the spatial context of themed environment designers, we end up with environment product, the result of environmentalist practice. Such product makes clear the intent of themed space designers (a.k.a. entertainment architects, location-based entertainment designers, or themed entertainment associates) to construct a systemically scientific knowledge of space to facilitate design and deployment at the service of commercial entertainment ventures. But themed environment product, as we shall see, is also the realized result of a re-appropriated grammar, enabling for the first time, a spatialized experience of post-structuralist linguistics.

Yet how this scientifico-linguistic model appears to the sentient individual is anything but in its raw spatial manifestation. Environmentalism, the expert language of experience, is also an art of sensory production.

For us, it's never just about plan, elevation, section; it's never about diagrams; it's never about bird's eye view. We draw those drawings, we build those models, but for us it's always about scene 1, scene 2, scene 3. What is the sequence of human experience? I guess you call that narrative. The way I like to think of it is the triumph of experience, or the triumph of emotion over rationality.³

This thematic *modus operandi* of Disney's environmental design group, Imagineering, has laid the foundation for all themed experience designers. The narrative construction of spatial inhabitation – of theming human experience – derives from a specific set of practices of spatial organization and control. In my work studying themed entertainment environment over the past three years, I have come to observe a handful of essential aesthetic practices which both construct and maintain the science of experience: the practices of theme-based design. Imbibers at a sports bar, families at a theme park, and adolescents at an edutainment museum are not to feel the spatial management practices which are an essential part of the venue's financial success; their experience is to be one of temporary escape (themers argue) from the everyday into a realm of fantasy. The experience of the inhabitant is thus twofold; at the same time that they may be experiencing the world of 18th century old-town America, they are being escorted carefully along a prescriptive consumer experience, compelling them as 21st century citizens to eat and shop 18th century America. These spatial practices of narrative experience construction begin with the scenographic trade described above by Kenneth Wong, but expand into a large field of practices which modify spatial

and temporal perception, organize its inhabitation, and strive to produce controlled experiences.

So if our story of the popular embrace of esoteric French theory began with environment product, it now continues with rat mazes and phonemes. Edward Chace Tolman, a gestalt-influenced psychologist studies rat behavior during his PhD at MIT through 1915 and publishes *Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men* in 1932 where he articulates the notion of the cognitive map: a mental 'map' formed by cogent beings of their spatial environments.⁴ In the late 1950's and 1960's, Noam Chomsky's work on generative grammars and natural language serves as a context for the implementation of spatial phonemic patterns in the early work of Christopher Alexander. Running roughly in parallel to this, Kevin Lynch embeds Alexander's language into a productive implementation of Tolman's analytical device. Lynch's *The Image of the City* collects, in fact, much of the scientific apparatus of this Boston crowd's work – syntactic structures, cognitive maps, phonemic patterns – and proposes a mechanism of design which breaks down spatial complexity into discreet elements: the path, the node, the edge, the district, and the landmark.⁵ His work is instrumental to the narrative formation of space, proposing a means for the specific employment of spatial devices (all five of them) to achieve specific effect. While I have no documentation of any specific meetings which took place between Walt Disney and this group of east coast intellectuals, clearly similar tendencies for the organization of space arise in both groups in the decades following 1950. In particular, as the Disney theme parks proliferate, their linguistic engagement of spatial planning increases – enabled, perhaps, by the discoveries of Mr. Lynch, *et al.*

But the more precise operations of the theme designer occur on a level more finely grained than allowed by the grammatical structures of spatial organization. Practically speaking, themed environment survives because of its semiotic engagements. Where the articulation of spatial elements designed to trigger legible understandings of space provides a syntactical foundation for spatial organization, the more powerful tools of manipulation occur at the level of these elements' signification. It is at this semiotic level of the spatial theme, in the end, that we discover the theoretical impulse of the themed designer. The process of signification essential to environmentalist practice presumes the signifier-signified pair first articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure proposes the concept of the *sign* as the basic unit of meaning in the construction of language. These signs (words, images, thoughts) are composed of two components: a *signifier*, which is the legible, aural, visible, *etc.* manifestation of the sign, and a *signified* or *referent*, which is that which the manifestation suggests, alludes to, or means. It is the sign that forms the basis of the conception of architectural patterns, in-

strumental cognitive maps, and themed environment product. But understanding the sign itself is not enough; in order to engage in environment product design, two important and more contemporary modifications to Saussure's semiotic system are essential.

The first of these is Jacques Derrida's concept of *differance* (*sic*), which focuses on the process of signification rather than the book-ends of the dialectic pair.⁶ There are many important aspects to *differance* which I will not comment on here, but one of its fundamental properties is the way in which it proposes an aberrant relationship between the signifier and what is signified. For Derrida, the signified is said to be "despatialized" and "detemporalized" from the signifier, indicating that the process of signification is one of *differance*, in terms of presence (the sign is present on the page, the referent is metaphorically "elsewhere") and of *deferral*, in terms of time (the cognition of the referent occurs after the signifier is read or heard, etc.). This resulting absence of the referent from the signifier allows diversity of meaning, such that not every signifier has a single set of referents, and therefore by definition incorporates ambiguity in the otherwise simple dialectic of signifier-signified.

The second essential addition to Saussure's semiotic model is that of Roland Barthes' concept of myth.⁷ Unlike proclamations of ideology, which are clear statements of intentionality, mythological articulations are constructed from careful manipulations of their semiotic structure so as to defer their ideological intentionality and to present instead their distortions as truth. Barthes suggests that for the ideological, what is said is important, but for the mythological, how one says what is said is important. When we see an advertisement for toothpaste which shows images of happy couples in love, the myth is operating to equate happiness in life with oral hygiene; the intention is to support the pharmaceutical industry through toothpaste purchases, but this message is deferred through its carefully manipulated representation. Barthes explains this process as one of a double-layered signification, where one signifier-referent pair (a sign) becomes a signifier for yet another referent. However, myth obfuscates the final legibility of this second referent, through what Barthes calls a process of distortion. In the example above, the presentation of the toothpaste (signifier) suggests that users will find happiness (referent). This pair forms a legible sign which appears complete. At the same time, it is evident that this sign is constructed as a signifier with the desired purchase of the toothpaste as referent. But if we understand the toothpaste/happiness sign as an encouragement to purchase toothpaste, the actual significances of why, for example, the people depicted are really happy, or what if anything in the toothpaste would actually make someone happy, are distorted. Combining, then (in my rapid-fire overview of semiotic history), Barthes' concept of distortion with Derrida's notion of *differance*,

which is much more richly articulated, environment product design practitioners work not to eradicate meanings or establish clear manifestos of significance (this would be, according to Barthes, an example of ideology), but to propose that certain legibilities are at times more important than others.

Figure one, a sort of outline I like to imagine pinned to the cubicle walls of designers at the Rockwell Group outlines these processes at work in the themed environment, describing the individual layers of signification and myth-production.⁸ Where Barthes proposes a two-layered system of the production of myth, themed designers must extend it to four in order to accommodate the complex representational aspects of spatial design. Each sign-becoming-signified process, represented by a dashed arrow, is a process of myth, within which the process of *differance* operates to muddle the layers of legibility. The first level of spatial signification is that of the textual signification of spatial objects where the four letters "wall" signify a mental, and sensory, construction of the aspects of a wall. Through the process of myth, this textual sign then operates as a signifier in the next level of signification, where the physical sense (sight, aural detection, touch, etc.) of an actual wall object signifies the physical properties of the wall. At this point, the legibility of the significance of the word "wall" is deferred and despatialized in favor of the physical, material presence of the wall itself. While an example of the process of myth-making, the actual construction of this myth remains relatively innocuous on the terms of social communication. This architectural sign is then incorporated as a signifier in the subsequent thematic sign, where the actual design of the wall is used to represent certain aspects of design.

It is here where the multiple layers of inscription work to defer and despatialize certain readings through the process of myth making. The "wall design"/"narrative element" pair operate both as the predominant sign of the themed environment and as a mythological signifier to the metanarrative of the corporate consumer economy. The semiotic presence of this metanarrative, however, is intended to

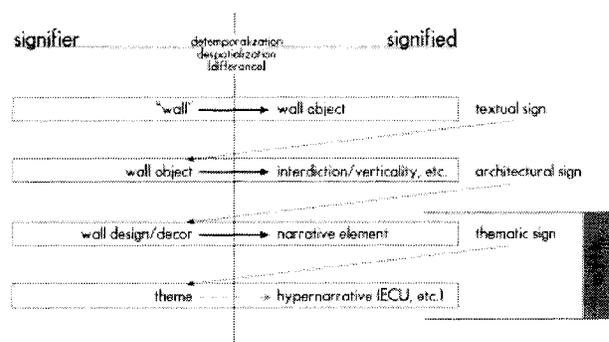


Fig. 1. The architectural semiotics of myth-making.

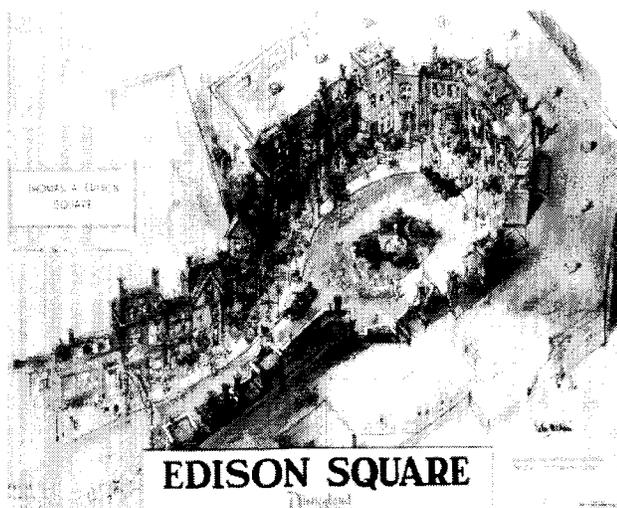


Fig. 2. Disney's Edison Square⁹

distort the meanings of the prior layers of signification. In the same way that the toothpaste advertisement distorts the meanings of a happy couple, the spatial theme distorts the meanings of a wall as a device to block access. Like the happy couple whose actual reason for happiness is appropriated to equate happiness with toothpaste consumption, the wall's reason for placement (to secure an area, to signify the limit of public access, etc.) is appropriated to tell a story of time travel (Disney's Main Street USA), virtual tourism (visiting New York city while in Las Vegas), or of a fictional past (experiencing an ancient archaeological site at the Luxor hotel, also in Las Vegas).

An example of such a spatial semiotic intervention appears in Figure two. This image is of Edison Square, a planned offshoot of Main Street USA in the Disney theme parks which has never been fully realized. Edison Square represents the typical spatial organization of theme park buildings consistent across not only Disney theme parks, but across theme parks and entertainment destinations worldwide. Environment product designers present us with a large building with multiple fronts. As with typical, less explicitly themed examples of this architectural type – the strip mall – the public way is kept free of the obstructions of services by allowing all the stores, eateries, and game parlors to be serviced from the rear, which opens directly onto the backstage area. What is unique about the themed version is, however, the way in which the separation between "front stage" (that part that guests are privy to) and "back stage" (where 20th century carts run Pepsi™ invisibly to Frontierland) is architecturally handled. The semiotically playful manipulation of the surface of the dividing wall creates a condition whereby one's experience of this wall is spatially ambiguous; the precise location of the separation between inside and outside on one hand, and frontstage and

backstage on the other, is blurred. This is in stark contrast to the strip mall where one's entry into the store – and exodus from the world outside – is clearly indicated by a door in the front façade, and one's passage from the public and private parts of the store is clearly and often clumsily marked. When one enters a shop in Edison Square, one is passing through a wall surface which typically marks a passage from a more public realm to a more private one (from street to store, from mall corridor to individual shop), but in fact no such threshold has been crossed: the theme park visitor is still on the themed front stage. Furthermore, when one enters bathrooms, offices, work areas, storehouses, or whatever other symbolic 'private' areas have been deemed appropriate to the theme and are thus made accessible to the public, one still remains at stage front. In these cases, the wall whose typical semiotic operation is to signify, through its presence, interdiction or access, signifies instead, through its themed décor, the spatial narrative which more often than not includes a themed presentation of an artificial backstage. The actually functioning backstage, the space where carts run sodas and stuffed animals from storehouse to themed store and employees take unthematic union-required breaks, is deferred (if at all present, it is presented later, on other rides, when a door is unceremoniously left open, or through careful study of visitor maps) and despatialized (such that the redundancy of the themed backstage plays surrogate to the actual backstage) through this architectural-semiotic game.

Even beyond the highly controlled theme park environment, similar spatial mechanisms are at play. In Disney's well-known venture into community development, Celebration, Florida, the community hospital ventured to offer front stage and back stage versions of its hospitality theme in a novel programmatic reorganization of a medical service center. The hospital cafeteria has been replaced with a four-star restaurant with a nationally renowned chef, and the physical therapy facility doubles as a health club for community residents. In order to accommodate the diverse crowds that these hybrid programming decisions target, the hospital also doubled its corridor system so that Friday evening guests on their way from the health club to the restaurant won't encounter actual hospital patients.¹¹ Each means of circulation presents itself as the main circulation corridor, creating a front and back stage for diners and exercisers and another for patients and doctors, locating appropriate spatial programs in relation to each manner of occupation, and in the end semiotically imposing a clear spatial distinction between the "hospital" and "hospitality" themes. This semiotic/scenographic pursuit is carried further from the progenitors of environmentality product (and closer to our everyday experience) in other aspects of medical care. Environmental psychologists and geriatric psychiatrists agree that the effect of environment on mental comfort for Alzheimer's patients can be

great. Since those suffering from Alzheimer's are able to recollect thoughts from their distant memory, nostalgic design has recently been offered as an answer to providing a comfortable surrounding for these patients. For a recent facility, designers found such inspiration in photographs not only of mid-century downtowns but of "reproduction streets in shopping malls, Disney World, and even a casino in upstate Connecticut."¹² The mythically invisible spatial semiotics of themed environment are handed back to everyday life after their refinement in the controlled confines of the theme park. If architecturally decorative pastiche is good enough for the terminally ill, what are they also getting along with it? To use Main Street, U.S.A. or Foxwoods Resort Casino as design motivation is not to merely replicate aesthetic décor, but to replicate the spatialization of *differance*, and the social and political implications thereof. Jean Baudrillard importantly explained the precession of simulacra, and was clear to confirm that this precession does not require the ignorance of the simulacra's situation. Within the context of a medical care facility, borrowing from Disney and borrowing from geriatric psychiatry seem altogether different. The former entails an engagement with spatial practices that are not about medical support or recovery, but about consumption and subservience. Both in the Celebration Hospital and in the Village at Waveny Care Center, we see steps towards the thematic mechanization of everyday environments, where the potentially duplicitous engagement of *differantiation* and *mythography* enter everyday life on a scale we are not yet accustomed to.

But if all we get from the designers of themed environment product are hokey looking hospitals, why am I obsessed with attributing knowledge of linguistic theory to their makers? The easy answer is: "why would we assume otherwise?". After all, intelligent well-read graduates do go work for Imagineering, The Rockwell Group, hok-E, and Wimberly Allison Tong and Goo. To assume that only we academic theorists are privy to this knowledge is laughable. But my more thorough answer is not a mere acknowledgement of inevitability, but a critical attack both on those who claim an apoliticalness of post-structuralism and those – even worse – who are content to dismiss otherwise instrumental theory as unimportant. Themed environment design is merely one area where both of these positions are clearly faulty, and where their repudiation is essential to understanding the social significance of critical work in this area. As the political importance of understanding the mechanisms behind our cultural practices increases (as in the eerie case of medical care facilities), the acknowledgement and discovery of the theoretical impulses in these mechanisms can prove insightful. In the case of the post-structuralist work presented here, I firmly believe that this work, often taken to remain outside of politics, is quite politically charged. Derrida's early

grammatological work is apolitical only to the extent that the reader is unwilling to envision or engage its applications. Undoubtedly it is slippery, and at times seems to intentionally evade clarity, but the failure to understand the implications of its instrumentalization – its social and political significance – is a disabling oversight in our (post)modern culture. I believe that only through an engaged application of Saussure's, Derrida's, and Barthes' linguistic theories could I have understood the actual mechanics of themed environment design in a way which enables me to act upon these developments, either as I am doing here, or in design practice.

On the other hand, through acts committed by a different group of academics and intellectuals, the continued dismissal of the efficacy of explicitly instrumental theory (that of Lynch and Alexander, for example) can only lead to a continued failure to understand how theory is being pragmatically employed to effect change. After Lynch's popularity waned in academic architectural circles, for example, critiques of his pseudo-scientific analysis marginalized his work out of academia and into the hands of corporate developers. While the criticism of his work may be (in my opinion, is) founded, the ignorance of it is not. The vast work in Geographic Information Systems, urban planning, and spatial analysis which refers to Lynch's work, and the newly reinvigorated interest of Christopher Alexander's work among computer scientists, not to mention the environmental product designer's adoption of both thinkers' work, attests to the significance of what we otherwise see as reductive theory to many fields of endeavor. Theory is, in all of these cases, practiced. And the more it is practiced as a component of the making of our everyday spaces, the more it needs to be competently addressed. It should be obvious that I believe in the inseparability of theory and practice, but even more, I would like to go on record defending the practice of theory. Both that of mine, as a writer and theorist, and that of all those – including environment product practitioners – who engage it wittingly or not, to produce the environments in which we live.

NOTES

¹Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," *Ideology and Consciousness*, 6 (1986): 5-21.

²The Walt Disney Company, *Annual Report*, (1997).

³Kenneth Wong, *The Disney Legacy: Storytelling, Placemaking, and the American Life*. New York: Cooper Union, 1998. Personal notes from presentation.

⁴Edward Chace Tolman, *Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men*. (New York: The Century Co, 1932).

⁵Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁶Jacques Derrida, "Differance," *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. David B. Allison, trans. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973): 129-160

⁷Roland Barthes, *Mythologie*, Annette Lavers, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

⁸The Rockwell Group is one of the major themed environment product design firms operating today, responsible for many Disney projects, hotels and casinos.

⁹Sam McKim, colored pencil and gouache on brownline with pasted label, 26x32, (1957). Cited in Karal Ann Marling, "Imagineering the Disney Theme Parks,"

Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance, Karal Ann Marling, ed. (New York: Flammarion 1997): 98.

¹⁰*Marketplace* radio broadcast, reported and researched by Tanya Ott. November 9, 1998.

¹¹Deborah Baldwin, "Main Street as Memory Lane," *New York Times* Late Edition, East Coast (January 10, 2002): F.7