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LETTER FROM CELEBRATION / A Visit to the Disneyfied American Dream

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Woody Igou

WALT DISNEY MUST be spinning in his liquid helium, titanium-lined electronically monitored grave. His culminating utopian dream for Disney World was the construction of the futuristic domed city of EPCOT (Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow). In the decades since the '60s when Walt dreamed up EPCOT, our vision of a futuristic city has been tainted - superseded, in large part, by the frightening, impersonal archetypes found in movies like "Blade Runner" and "Brazil." Other than President Ronald Reagan's thankfully vague notion of a "shining city on a hill" and futuristic architect Paulo Soleri's noodlings in the desert, few depictions of the future seem too soothing. It is, therefore, no surprise that the downsized, truncated version of Walt's dream is now the town of Celebration. After a tour, I would give the EPCOT acronym a radically different interpretation - Edifyingly Pleasant Comfy Old-fashioned Town.

Celebration is the latest example of the architectural trend called the "new urbanism," which seeks to replace the spread-out suburban tracts created in the last 40 years under the tyranny of the automobile with a more livable alternative. "New urban" architects laudably seek to shrink the spaces normally dedicated to the automobile, increase the density of houses in a mixed-use format, and spruce up the community spirituality with the misty-eyed rococo architectural styles of yesteryear. In a strange, almost time-warped irony, Walt Disney's vision of a utopian Tomorrowland has been morphed by his successors to look vaguely like the very Chicago neighborhood where he was born in 1901.

Celebration is a unique hybrid of contradictory impulses in American history - the company town and the utopian community. Company towns, all but extinct today, were a child of capitalism in its most domineering aspects. Come work in our coal mine, they said, and all of your life's needs will be provided for, from the school to the church to the company-run grocery store.

Most American utopian experiments, on the other hand, have always been created out of wild-eyed, philosophical notions, usually of some vague socialist pedigree. Owenism, founded by Englishman Robert Owen, flourished in the United States between 1825 and 1848 and gave rise to more than 20 communities. Owenites believed in a socialism designed to aid workers oppressed by the excesses of the Industrial Revolution. Several similar Fourierist communities sprang up in the northeast in the wake of the depression of the 1840s.

The ideological tensions on view at Celebration, however, have also been downsized for the '90s. The utopian aims of the New Urbanism result in only a mild, passive form of social engineering aimed at maximizing happiness. In a purely philosophical utopian scheme, adherents of a certain outlook flock together and live in a unity of belief wherever they can safely commune. The "new urbanism" works from an opposite assumption, one without an overt philosophy. It seeks instead to create a communal architecture that will alter one's consciousness toward happiness and fulfillment after you move in. The presence of bands of happy, roving children, lemonade stands and front porches full of waving friends works a subtle magic.

The Greek root of utopia means both "good place" and "no place." As to the latter, Celebration suffers the unavoidable problem of being

plunked down in the middle of a former cow pasture near Disney World, without the underpinnings of a history or particularly chosen geography. However, except for a mildly stark treelessness and lack of historical patina, the town center looks rather charming. Imagine a block of Bermuda's capital rebuilt after a hurricane, or a chunk of old New Orleans sandblasted of all of its bewitching - flaws, and you get the picture. The works of some of the great architects of our day are fairly crammed side-by-side in the small town, without, surprisingly, too much jarring aesthetic combat.

According to Robert A. N. Stern, one of the architects who designed Celebration's layout, his main inspiration came from East Hampton, L.I. He says, "Drive into East Hampton and you see a worship site, a grassy area with trees, a big flag pole . . . and a cemetery that leads into town. We are looking for that same sort of lead-in here." I won't hold my breath waiting for a showcase Celebration graveyard, though.

As I stood in the town center, I realized that something else was missing from Robert Stern's vision: churches. The highest point in town, and the only steeple-like objects in downtown Celebration, are the Jetson-like spires of the movie house. Cesar Pelli built the twin towers of the movie house to be "immediately recognized from a distance" as a "sign post." Until churches are built at Celebration, the theater will function as a steeple, drawing townsfolk into the very form of celebrity worship that financed Celebration in the first place. Fortunately, there are no bells in the towers to announce show times, nor was a hunchback seen frolicking on the premises.

As is the practice in most planned towns, homeowners face a long list of restrictions built into their sales contracts as to what they can do with their houses. Home designs and paint colors must meet the pre-approved format. One bit of Americana has been tossed out - clotheslines in the front yard are banned. There are other, more discreet nudges toward approved tastefulness in Celebration. The Saturday farmer's market was in full swing when I visited. The main street was lined with outside vendors selling art, clothing and produce. It was like getting off a cruise boat in a hyper-sanitized Bahamian port. I noticed that nothing too tacky was being hawked by the artists. After reading the market's rules, I noted that market managers have a built-in tacky-meter. The following art is UNACCEPTABLE: Crocheting, knitting, novelty shell craft, coin jewelry and velvet painting.

In search of something perhaps a bit more offbeat, I entered what I supposed would be Celebration's den of funky uniqueness - Zirbres Antiques (my eyes in the blinding sun missed the more telling part of the sign, which read "and Reproductions"). As I looked around, it dawned on me that more than 90 percent of the "real antiques" were, in fact, mock-distressed reproductions. I became dizzy with the idea that I was inside the Chinese boxes of a simulated store furnishing falsely aged merchandise within a simulated town. The manager tried to soothe me by reminding me that the supposedly random objects were all "chosen" to be "consistent" with the allowable Celebration housing prototypes (Victorian, Classical, Colonial Revival, Coastal, Mediterranean and French). I did have fun, though, successfully identifying the six actual antiques in the shop.

Reeling a bit, I headed for one of Celebration's two art galleries in search of the authentic. As I entered the Wyland Gallery, my eyes were flooded with the bright, garish colors only attained by the artisans of the velvet school: day-glo whales and manatees cavorting in front of almost nuclear sunsets. Having been previously conditioned, I had but one thought: UNACCEPTABLE. In search of an "original" work amid the bountiful prints, I reached out and felt a canvas that was both textured and signed. No dice. These insidious objects, I was told, were not originals, but "repligraph" prints placed on pre-textured canvases. Ouch.

To combat my rising cognitive bewilderment, I retreated to the cool confines of the bar in Max's Grill, which overlooks the town's (gulp!)

man-made lake. Over what I think was a real scotch, I tried to imagine what French philosopher Jean Baudrillard is going to make of Celebration. Baudrillard has argued that the purposeful unreality of Disneyland was created to give Americans the mistaken belief that the rest of the United States is real, when, in fact, the entire country is a simulation of reality. Maybe it was the scotch, but it was all starting to seem strangely plausible: here I was, sitting in a town that was built to show the rest of the world what a "real" town should look like, all generated by a company specializing in illusion.

My mind drifted to Florida's truly surreal utopian experiment, which began in 1894 near Fort Myers. The town, called Estero, was founded by a lapsed Chicago physician named Cyrus Teed. His philosophy, called Cellular Cosmogony, posited that we all lived on the inside of a hollow earth. His "studies," using a 50-foot long surveying device of his own invention, proved that indeed the earth curved upward 128 inches every four miles and that further, the bothersome sun and stars we see in the sky are mere "reflections." (Of what, I'm not sure.) His philosophy further espoused the destruction of the sexual dualism between male and female, in favor of a "eunuch state." In an eerie parallel with a latter-day spiritual community in Central Texas, Teed took on the Hebrew name for Cyrus, which is "Koresh." After receiving a "donation" of Florida land from a wealthy follower, Teed took more than 150 believers to a remote area of Southern Florida and founded the Koreshan Unity Settlement. The settlement flourished at first, building a school, a grocery and a small port. But in another parallel with David Koresh, Teed found himself accused of practicing a rather selective form of celibacy in the presence of younger women in the group. The publication of his last book, entitled "The Immortal Manhood," probably didn't help at all on that count, nor did his declaration that "all that is opposed to Koreshanity is antichrist." His grandiose plans for Estero called for it to become the capital of the world and to contain 8 million inhabitants. The street plan called for roads to be 400 feet wide. (Talk about your tyranny of the automobile - this seemed more like the tyranny of a Panzer division.)

After his various utopian schemes foundered, Teed became a broken man and died. His followers kept a vigil around his body, which lay in a tin bathtub, awaiting his promised resurrection. After four long, hot Florida days, only the merciful intervention of the health department forced his entombment. Both Teed's body and his beloved tin bathtub were washed from his tomb out to sea during a hurricane in 1921. Amazingly, his ancient and devoted followers held onto Estero until the 1960s, when it became one of the state's strangest parks.

Freudians who have studied Teed's life have noted that the strange appeal of the cult was its clear representation of a "return to the womb." The recent flourishing of both gated communities and bland towns such as Celebration show that this type of longing has reemerged in our crime-ridden times. Even though I find a withdrawal into an idealized yesterday a bit dubious, I do understand it. If a genuine community spirit can emerge at Celebration, it shows that the ills of the suburbs may have an answer. And even if things get a little boring, the townsfolk can always drag their circa 1900 Cyrus Teed tin bathtubs out onto their front porches, wave at passersby and gaze up at the hollow sky, looking for China.

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