

# BEYOND KITSCH:

## THE CORPORATE SUBLIME

by Dirk Hebel and Deane Simpson

### **WE ARE IN FLORIDA, AT DISNEY'S ALL-STAR RESORTS**

*Perversion Neurosis: a neurosis resulting from a very strong attraction and repulsion and internal conflict in relation to uncommon urges, where internal tension and self-awareness are acting strongly and simultaneously. (1)*

We wonder if we are suffering from this. We are intensely ambivalent about this architecture. It shocks us, and somehow appalls us but we are strangely fascinated by it. It is an architectural car-crash...

Our initial thoughts are directed toward dismissing the work as a most extreme and perverse form of kitsch, or as a grotesque manifestation of the end of culture – a collapse occurring after the 'Magic Moment'. There is, of course a great deal of material that offers this point of view. Vittorio Gregotti, for example in 'The Future is not Disneyland' (2) describes the architecture of Disney as 'a manifesto in the trite' and Disneyland as "...a demonstration that when thought grows 'weak', even if subtler and more flexible, it lays itself open to persons adept at turning thought into power tactics."

We are careful not to fall too easily into this position. We are interested in the possibility, as Matteo Vercelloni (3) has also suggested, to examine Disney through other lenses and parameters, in an attempt to develop new

critical tools "that supercede ideological preconceptions or the facile and vague classification of Kitsch."

And besides, so many people seem to love it here!?!

### **REPRESENTATIONAL POST-MODERNISM – USA**

We understand Representational Post-Modernism (RPM) as a collection of so-called "popular styles" like Spanish Regency, Colonial or Victorian Style etc., which Post-modernism gave a theoretical background to. Post-modernism opened up these everyday and sometimes banal architectural styles to mass culture.

The concerns of contemporary architectural discourse on both sides of the Atlantic have clearly moved beyond the theme of representational 'Post-Modernist' architecture. The atmosphere suggests that the 'war' against RPM architecture has been won, as Heinrich Welfing states in his essay 'I Feel Lost Without Columns' (4). No one, it seems, is really interested in talking or writing about it. RPM, however, is clearly not dead, especially in the United States, where the vast majority of new construction conforms to what could fit into this category. Observations on the continued influence of Post-Modernism on American 'Everyday Architecture' offers a rare discussion of this theme. Welfing describes among other issues, the gap in Architecture magazines in the USA between the featured architectural projects and

the projects and products presented in the advertising. This gap is seen as a symptom of a mismatch between discourse within architecture, and the vast majority of what is being currently built –in most cases without design architects– and what he refers to as 'Everyday Architecture'. This is of course not a new theory – Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown are among those who base much of their position on the existence of this gap during another period, the late 1960's and early 1970's. But it is of course important to question why the discourse Venturi and Scott-Brown started was misunderstood and strengthened RPM more than it transformed it. Welfing suggests Post-Modernist architects, uninhibited about designing for consumer purposes, have been adept at generating a consumer-based architecture grounded in the necessity to provide a 'comfortable', 'reassuring' and unthreatening environment, which does not break with 'traditional ways of seeing things' by repeating what people are used to seeing. This typically involves a rejection of dogmatic rationalism, and results in a form of naïve eclecticism at the level of applied skin, from which irony, and multiple readability are absent.

The All Star Resort is not an isolated example of this mode of architecture in the United States. It is however, one of the most pure forms of it, stressing the gap between the majority of everyday architecture, particularly in the US, which wants to satisfy the consumer at all costs and contemporary architectural discourse, which seems to have lost connection to reality.

## THE MAGIC-MOMENT

The Disney Corporation has had a particularly interesting relationship with RPM over the past decades.

From the early 1950s, when Walt Disney began to realize Disneyland in Anaheim, California, architects were excluded from the design process. Instead, the design team consisted of those from his own background, including motion-picture set designers, artists, special effect experts, model makers and writers. For Disney, who conceived of the architecture of the theme park from the beginning in terms of motion picture storyboards, these professionals were critical in communicating an architecture of '3D Story-Telling'. They included Dick Irvine, Marvin Davis, Harper Goff or Herbert Dickens Ryman, who came to be known as the first 'Imagineers'. Their focus in the Disney theme-parks was the translation of 2D narrative into 3D experience. This focus is continued today, and represents the strength of the 'Imagineers' design approach to the Theme Parks of Disney.

In the late 1980's, a shift occurred in the position of Disney in relation to architects. Under the new leadership of Michael Eisner, a series of collaborations were formed with prominent contemporary architects such

as Gehry, Isozaki, Graves, Stern, Venturi and Scott-Brown. This, what we want to call 'Magic-Moment', saw a remarkable coincidence of the project of the Disney Corporation, with the project of many of the leading players in architectural discourse at the time. This could be described as a coincidence of the spatial-cinematic logic of Disney, one based on the cornerstone of '3D story telling', with a form of representational post-modernist architecture, addressing architecture as a system of signification/communication, one that could integrate popular culture and embrace an openness to playfulness and irony. (5) A 'Magic Moment', in which, the Imagineering project of Disney, overlaps with a 'symbolic architecture', which according to Charles Jencks "...is tied to many meanings in a multivalent way so that one cannot tell what generated the form: whether it was function, space, sign, ornament or technique." (6)

Disney's All-Star-Resort is built with a lower budget, and is designed by less prominent architects than the 'Magic-Moment' projects. Importantly, it is not presented as playing a provocative or polemical role in architectural discourse at the time it is completed. It is constructed after the waning of the 'Magic-Moment' when contemporary architectural discourse has moved onto other themes, other questions.

## WALT DISNEY'S ALL-STAR-RESORT

Designed by the Miami-based firm Arquitectonica, in association with HKS, the Walt Disney's All Star Resort in Orlando is a budget level 5,760 –room themed vacation resort hotel on the Walt Disney World property. Completed in 1999, the complex is composed of three separate resort 'Villages' defined by the themes: Sports, Movies and Music. Each resort 'Village' comprises ten identically-constructed 192-room hotel buildings, a central building with reception, foodcourt, souvenir shop, video arcade and attendant resort and pool amenities. The hotel buildings, are three-story, "T-shaped" blocks grouped in pairs, with independent courtyards, organized by themes.

The design and construction of the complex is heavily dictated by budget and time constraints. The plan is based on a logic of hygiene efficiency: each wing of the T-shaped motel must be able to be cleaned by two maids in one day. This economic factor determines the number of rooms in each building and its shape. Circulation is organized along external corridors similar to the motel model, but stacked, eliminating the higher cost of internal corridors. The construction technique is 'tunnel'-formed' in-situ concrete, a technique which allows 18 hotel units to be poured in one day. At an urban scale, the formation of 'T'-shaped blocks



placed in an idealized landscape is reminiscent of Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin for Paris. Rather than the pure field or grid, the buildings are laid out on primary and secondary axes generated from the reception buildings and major pool elements. Each 'Village' is surrounded by parking fields in a similar configuration to that of a shopping mall, in a strategy that attempts to minimize the distance between car and hotel unit.

These are the most reductive buildings: cheap, and fast. They exhibit a ruthless rationale of efficiency typically associated with modernist planning.

Applied to the basic building shell are large quantities of themed material. The most important aspects of exterior 'Theming' occur at three sites on each building block. Firstly, the escape stairs at the end of each arm of the 'T' are enclosed in a three-story tall themed icon – these constitute 'Ducks' if we are to use Robert Venturi's terminology. Secondly, the balcony railings on the two upper floors and parapets of each building are clad in themed iconic elements – these constitute surface applied decoration. Thirdly, monumental icons, larger than those enclosing the escape stairs, located in a recess at the junction of the 'T'-arms, define a themed landscape in tandem with its facing twin – these also operate as decorative elements without interior functions.

## WE LOVE IT VENTURI – SCOTT-BROWN

This form of architecture can be understood as a vivid manifestation of Venturi and Scott-Brown's theoretical position. They go so far as to express regret that they are not responsible for designing it.

*"We love it, the idea of it and the skill with which it has been designed. This is not surprising since it represents what we have been acknowledging for a long time: the messy vitality of the public sector and the power of symbolic form."*(7)

Venturi is describing the 2,880-room Walt Disney Pop Century Resort also designed by Arquitectonica, next to the All-Star resorts. It is practically identical except that the themes of Movies, Music and Sports are replaced by the theme of Pop culture in the 20th century, decade by decade. For Venturi, this Resort describes a third moment in the evolution of what he refers to as 'Pop Urbanism.' The first, that of the late '60's Las Vegas of his 'Learning From Las Vegas' is characterized by the iconographic logic of the Strip manifested in the 'decorated shed'. The second, that of the Las Vegas of the present, is characterized by a scenographic logic similar to that of the theme park of Disneyland, one manifested in the new dominance of the 'duck' at a large scale. The

Disney Resort, as the third moment in the evolution of this form of urbanism is described by Venturi as a "...vivid urban complex that is beginning to embrace symbolic content by combining surface and form, graphic signage, and sculptural symbolism – both the "decorated shed" and the "duck". (8)

Venturi is here proposing the model of the fusion of the duck and the decorated shed as the next step along the way to the next form of Pop-Urbanism, one that also shifts from the controlled environment of Disney or the 'Resort', to the urban complex of the 'City', a model that he sees already partially realized in the Tokyo of today:

*"...a vivid multifaceted place that pragmatically juxtaposes decorated sheds and ducks through signage and sculpture, civic and commercial content – all in the service of enhanced communication, the vital community building tool of our multicultural era... Let us be stimulated by the vigor of iconography appropriate for our information/electronic age!" (9)*

## CONTENT

*"Stay at a Resort that salutes the legends of Disney films - from Herbie, the lovable VW Bug, to the spotted pups of "101 Dalmatians" to the playful residents of Andy's Room. Imagine yourself under the bright lights of the silver screen, as the headliner in your very own all-star adventure!*

*Specially themed accommodations, swimming pools and dining experiences add to the whimsical atmosphere of Disney's All-Star Movies Resort. Enjoy adorable oversized icons, including familiar faces from Disney/Pixar's "Toy Story" and Disney's "Fantasia," colorful in-room designs and the reel-y good time that comes with celebrating classic Disney films."* (10)

The 'civic and commercial content' that Venturi mentions is confined, at the All-Star Resort to a form of self-referential commercial content. It refers to themes and characters - essentially products, that the public is assumed to be familiar with and be able to easily consume. Content is translated literally into the form of applied cartoon motifs. Here, of concern is the relationship of architecture to the banality of mass consumerism. One which, at the extreme, produces an architecture condensed to a form of media for the presentation and promotion of commercial products. In the logic of the All-Star Resort, it becomes evident, that without the next product, the next architectural intervention is not possible. This could suggest a shift in the approach to and translation of content after the 'Magic-Moment' – a shift toward the literal. The MM projects, generally prestigious hotels, and corporate buildings, rather than the build-



Disney's All Star Sports Resort: aerial view. Picture Credit: Alex S. MacLean, from Mutations



Walt Disney World, Orlando, Florida. Disney's All Star Resorts: aerial view. Picture Credit: Alex S. MacLean from Mutations

ings that the mass public has contact with, proposes a more abstract relationships to content. Graves, for example, at the Swan and Dolphin Hotels engaged with Disney ideas without using actual Disney figures, along with developing specific methods of abstraction. Post MM projects, even for the newer prestigious resort hotels suggest a more literal relation to content, a more straight-forward approach to 'telling the story'.(11) But what alternatives are there to the existing products? If Disney proposed an All-Star Philosophers Resort for Euro-Disney in Paris, would this make us less concerned about the issue of content? Would a four story tall Walter Benjamin alleviate our neurosis?

## EXTENT - INTERIOR

We are in awe at the sheer extent of the interior decoration of the hotel rooms. It evokes the extent of ornament common to the Victorian interior, covering the walls, carpeted floor, bed spreads, blankets, ceiling, tiled floor, lamp shades, room numbers, outdoor night light, shower curtain, chairs, doors, hanging artwork, curtains, tiled walls, shower curtain and fire evacuation instructions. It is a Mickey steam that condenses on every surface. Venturi's description of the interior of the proposal for National Football Hall of Fame from 1968 could not be more accurate, except the projected images of film are petrified as patterned wallpaper, patterned carpet etc. The images "spill over the surfaces, essentially independent of the architectural forms they smother, like Giotto's frescoes in the Arena Chapel, or the rocaille ornament which indiscriminately suffuses walls, fixtures and furnishings in a Rococo interior, or the ubiquitous and independent patterns on the tattooed man in the circus, or the camouflage patterns on a military tank, whose purpose, significantly, is to render its surfaces ambiguous. The message dominates the space." (12)

## SCALE - EXTERIOR

We are in awe at the scale of the 'monumental exterior icons'.

At the All-Star Movie Resort for example, characters from Toy Story, Mighty Ducks or 101 Dalmatians are blown up in scale, becoming three to four storey tall buildings in themselves. This transformation of scale and context creates particularly strange and powerful spatial qualities. (13)

There are certainly parallels in this strategy to American Pop Artists, especially in the over-scaled sculptural representations of emblems of popular culture by Claes Oldenburg for example. There is also clearly a parallel to some of the earlier work of Frank Gehry. Here, we are less interested in the act of scaling than the effect it pro-

duces, in particular, the 'pseudo-public' spaces formed in-between the paired monumental icons. Even though Venturi and Scott-Brown base experience in Learning From Las Vegas exclusively on the car, in which billboards and signs as the architectural space defining elements are spaced across the width of the road infrastructure, here Disney relies on a more intimate and controlled pedestrian scale in which the monumental icons appear larger than their actual size through their close adjacency.

The remarkable outdoor-room formed by the composite elevational skins of the opposing buildings and the attached hollow figural elements, seems almost accidental. It suggests a form of accidental baroque space created out of highly controlled intentional elevations. This is more than Disney planned or anticipated. The space seems to be the accidental result of other decisions and forces, it is an accumulation of facade applications and something happened which almost apposes the otherwise so affirmative, entertaining and consciously continuing theme-spaces of Disney. The experience of standing in the space between a 13m tall Woody and a 13m tall Buzz Lightyear suggests, to us, the sublime, or a contemporary form of it.

## THE SUBLIME

The 'sublime', as an important theme in 18th century aesthetic discourse, attempts to describe powerful subjective aesthetic experiences that do not fit clearly into the classical conception of beauty of the time. Commonly, descriptions of these experiences document feelings of awe and rapture as a result of being overwhelmed by nature. The sublime usually includes some level of ambivalence. Edmund Burke in his 'Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful' (1757), describes... "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature... is astonishment; and astonishment is the state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror." (14)

This is of course the largeness we were faced with at the All-Star Resort. It is possible to propose a shift in the inspiration of the sublime, according to a shift in sites of power, from the Church, to the Nation State, to the global corporations. Where the inspiration for the sublime was seen, during the Romantic Period, as Nature, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, in *Beauty and the Technological Sublime*, locates inspiration for the contemporary sublime in technology and the global economy. Perhaps it is not inappropriate then, that for us, Disney operates as a site of the contemporary sublime. Defining an experience of shock, under a 13m fiberglass Dalmatian.



## END-GAME

At the Disney All-Star Resort, we are shocked by what we imagine to be the cost of the decoration compared to the cost of the shed. This phenomenon is of course the 'end-game' of what Venturi learnt from Las Vegas, a logic of the Decorated Shed, which aligns so closely (as we have seen in contemporary everyday RPM in the US) with the framework of global capital. This alignment is also illustrated by Richard Sennett in *Capitalism and the City* (15), in which he describes a logic of 'skin architecture' where only a thin skin applied to the building suggests particular identity, while the spaces themselves are 'ever more neutral, standard...' For Sennett, Skin Architecture, as a symptom of increasingly prevalent conditions of standardization of the urban environment and public consumption results in part from the understanding of buildings as investment units in the global market, in which 'space itself needs the uniformity, the transparency of money'. This devaluation of 'space' in exchange for identity is what concerns us, especially at the All Star Resort where it has been so successful in terms of its supplementary effects –in which the absurdity of the extent and scale of decoration has produced its own powerful aesthetic experience.

## MIND THE GAP

We are still left to treat our neurosis. There are two obvious directions in which to head. We could, as Venturi and Scott-Brown do, embrace the ugly and ordinary, the vitality of everyday 'trash'. The option to accept that it is 'almost alright' – 'We Love It', even although we know, that they incorporate a critical translation of that in their own built work. Or we could, as we initially suggested, return to dismiss this form of architecture as a perverse form of the anti-spatial - the Gregotti position, interpreting Disney as consumerist kitsch. It is possible to argue that the latter response is irresponsible and the former is naïve. In fact, an act of repression is necessary in both cases. Perhaps it makes sense to operate in the gap between the two. This gap is a more complex space than that located between mass and high culture, or between the naïve and the cynical, or between architecture as a service profession and architecture as a critical practice. In the gap exists the possibility to confront the banal from within, a technique of a subversive act.

One of the commandments at Disney Corporation is to never break the story line, in trick-film as well as in architecture. Ideally, there are no space- or time lapses, or a pause or even an illogical disruption in the sequence of the story. Just on occasion one can find moments like the courtyards at Disney-Resort, where a little bit of control seems to be lost. Perhaps there is a quality to that. In the trick-film industry in the 1960s one can find an opponent of Walt Disney, who understood the making

of trick-films a subversive act. Tex Avery used the possibilities of the medium to project spatial impossibilities, which removed themselves from a Hollywood-Genre of a spatial and time-based continuity. Prolonging, Cutting or Stand-Still, techniques which are possible in the virtual world of trick-film, are used to produce a (sometimes ironic) multireading, which does not oppose the idea of the Everyday or the cliché. But it uses those in an intelligent way to create new synapses and spatial relationships. In Avery's version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the wolf is driving a car, which flows for endless 10 seconds just as a hood through the picture, before the wolf can be seen in the very end (of this in reality mile-long car) in the cabin. The car is never shown in a total shot, it is a space-time montage. The spectator is asked to take on an active role, in modifying her or his own expectations of a seemingly well - known space. The spectator is asked to make an experience.

The critique on Disney would be the one of a closed system without space for interpretations or an actual self-made experience. The technique of a subversive act is to build in prolongings or short cuts into a story, which act against 1:1 translations or adaptations from one medium into the other. "Learning from ..." is a book still to be written.

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(1) Dabrowski, K., 'Psychoneurosis is Not An Illness', London: Gryf Publications, 1972 p.300

(2) Gregotti, Vittorio, 'The Future is not Disneyland', Panorama, 7 June 1992, zitiert in Matteo, Vercelloni, 'Heterotopias of Compensation, Disney Theme Parks and Their Hotel Structures.' in Domus 787, November 1996, p.42

(3) Vercelloni, Matteo, 'Heterotopias of Compensation, Disney Theme Parks and Their Hotel Structures.' in Domus 787, November 1996, p.42

(4) Welfin, Heinrich, 'I Feel Lost without Columns', in Revision of Postmodernity, Junius Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2004

(5) The direction of exchange was not only one-sided during this period. Architects like Michael Graves, designing the Swan and Dolphin Hotels for Disney also learnt from the Imagineering team., He was intrigued by the applied movie techniques of Disney: "The exercise in abstraction and the flattening of forms grew to fascinate Graves", Beth Dunlop writes. (in: Building a Dream, The Art of Disney Architecture, Abrams Publ., NY, 19XX) Graves realized, that in flattening his original three-dimensional forms into "filets", he could achieve a more playful result, which held more possibility for multiple readings. "It was a discovery along the way" he recalls.

(6) Jencks, Charles, 'The Post-Modern Metanarrative', in Revision der Post-Moderne, Junius Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2004

(7) Venturi, Robert, 'Disney Goes Pop', in Metropolis April 2004, p. 117

(8) Venturi, Robert, 'Disney Goes Pop', in Metropolis April 2004, p. 117

(9) Venturi, Robert, 'Disney Goes Pop', in Metropolis April 2004, p. 117

(10) Disney All-Star-Resort Website: <http://disneyworld.com>

(11) The Animal Kingdom Resort for example, is pregnant with themed content that is translated in a very obvious way. It is far more controlled and nuanced in its storytelling than the All-Star Resort. The approach to the Animal Kingdom Resort is staged with the precision of a Hitchcock scene. The private parking lots are lowered, the landscape and vegetation are altered, the entrance is elevated, all directed toward telling the story frame by frame, scene by scene.

(12) Venturi, Robert, 'A Buildingboard Involving Movies, Relics and Space' Architectural Forum, April 1968, pp74-79. Cited in Wigley, M., 'The Decorated Gap' Ottogono 94, March 1990

(13) Disney is of course an expert at the manipulation of scale. The attraction 'Mickey's House' for example is based on the logic of 3/8 reduction from the full scaled, and much of the Magic Kingdom is working to a 5/8 reduction.

(14) Burke, Edmund, 'Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful', Oxford University Press, 1989, Erstausgabe 1757

(15) Sennett, Richard, 'Capitalism and the City' in Cities for the new Millennium, ed. Marcial Echenique & Andrew Saint, Spon Press London/NY 2001