

10-1. How does the theme park offer us a mirror to the city? Can the two be separated?

### **James Smith**

Coney Island: The Technology of the Fantastic

“Coney Island is the incubator for Manhattan’s incipient themes and infant mythology. The strategies and mechanisms that later shape Manhattan is tested in the laboratory of Coney Island before they finally leap toward the larger island. Coney Island is a fetal Manhattan.”(30)

“To survive as a resort – A place offering contrast – Coney Island is forced to mutate: It must turn itself into the total opposite of Nature. It has no choice but to counteract the artificiality of the new metropolis with its own Super-Natural. Instead of suspension of urban pressure. It offers intensification.”(33)

“An ensemble of snow-white pinnacles and towers limned against the blue firmament [that] is wonderfully pleasing to thousands of eyes heartily tired of the brick, mortar and stone of the Great City.”(39)

“You see, this being the Moon, it is always changing. A stationary Luna Park would be an anomaly.”(41)

“Even if on the Moon, Thompson has created the first City of Towers: functionless, except to over stimulate the imagination and keep any recognizable earthly realities at a distance.”(41)

Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, The Monacelli Press, 1994

The Theme Park is an urban, utopian dream celebrating the relationship between nature, humankind and myth. It is a dream realized, a story told and experience, taking the visitor to the ends of the earth and beyond. Unlike a piece of art, or a cinematic experience, a Theme Park utilizes all five senses. The viewer is completely emerged in a new world and the evidence of the fantasy is all around. Reality is left at the gate. Once inside the park, the details of reality are hidden.

### DESIGNING THE DISNEY THEME PARKS

"Disneyland was also the place that was a TV show, the place where the line between real life and the marvels glimpsed on the set in the corner of the living room became hopelessly blurred. It became an icon, almost from the first. But icons are hard to define. Although the word 'Disneyland' often assumes a vague, emblematic aura in discussions of popular and commercial architecture, the place is rarely examined as a systematic, commercial enterprise with a self-conscious cultural agenda and dazzling battery of techniques for realizing the ends that were envisioned. This process——Disney's

distinctive approach to re-presenting the past, the present and the future in concrete form——has helped to transform our responses to architecture and the city."

Karal Ann Marling, Curator

The Architecture of Reassurance: Designing the Disney Theme Parks

Disconcerted by the post-war world, they sought a soothing alternative to urban decay and suburban sprawl. As Disney himself wrote in a draft proposal, Disneyland was to be 'the essence of America as we know it...the nostalgia of the past, the exciting glimpses of the future.' It is immensely revealing to know that Disney added - and then crossed out - 'the complexities of the present.'"

The Architecture of Reassurance: Designing the Disney Theme Parks

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO THEMED ATTRACTION DESIGN: DEFINING TERMS

"Ride Vehicle" - The vehicle that guests board to experience an attraction.

"OPs" - Theme Park Operations. This department is tasked with operating the theme park attraction, to safely load and unload guests from the ride, and to keep it running at maximum capacity.

"Theming" - Any prop, set, or otherwise extraneous material used in creating a themed environment. Example of use, 1) "We need some more theming here on this wall." 2)

"This piece of theming has fallen off the wall."

"Iron ride" - A ride with little or no theming.

Nate Naversen, The Imagination Portal

<http://www.themedattraction.com/index>.

The Theme Park is a symbol of American culture suggesting new approaches to the real world beyond the entrance gates. Today's urban exits, the shopping mall and the resort, are directly connected to the fantasy world of the theme park. The consumption of goods is the spectacle and the arcade provides the isolation of reality, allowing for an escape from the 'real-world'. They represent an isolated experience celebrating entertainment and fantasy, appealing to the consumer and changing society's expectations of the urban landscape.

The Escalator is the new "Iron Ride"

Recently the Shopping Mall has entered the urban landscape, the arcade of the mall has been removed and what is left is an open forum of consumption represented by such

examples as Harvard Square and Newbury Street in Boston and New York's Times Square. Consumption is the entertainment and the fantasy.

## **Katherine James' response**

One might assume that the appropriate respite from the harshness of urban life after the second machine age might be a return to nature, to that which is essential and organic. Instead there was an insatiable thirst to push the urban model still further, to take it to fantastic extremes in the leisure setting of the theme/ amusement park. We see this in the development of Coney Island: "To survive as a resort-- a place offering contrast—Coney Island is forced to mutate: it must turn itself into the total opposite of Nature, it has no choice but to counteract the artificiality of the new metropolis with its own Super-Natural" (Koolhaas, 33).

The Coney Island theme parks were essentially reinventions of the city designed to provide an anecdote to that same city. The parks were designed in the image of the urban center, cueing all the feelings of excitement, consumerism, delight and overwhelm that Manhattan offered. There were lights and towers, dramatic night skylines, intense population density, and a constant flow of activity. What made these parks anecdotes rather than reproductions were the edits or subtractions from the precedent: removed to the other side of the island were the less desirable citizens, spending rather than earning was the consumer activity; absent was the sense of uncontrollability of the city. The park was a controlled "cardboard" environment, with all the excitement (and more) and little of the danger of the real thing. "This forest of towers, instead of Coney's virgin nature, now provides an antidote to the grimness of the city."(41)

What is interesting in the Coney Island/ Manhattan relationship might be the implications of the feedback of the displaced pleasure center to the city. There is a city of working hours—of earning, of daily grind, of permanent realities of transportation, health, cohabitation—and a "city" of leisure hours—of spending, amusement, ephemerality. Because all of the entertainments and pleasures of the city have been displaced to another location, the city itself finds its uniqueness in the drudgery that one would escape. The mirror image, the supernatural city of the amusement park, is more fantastic and more exhilarating than the "natural" city, making the original seem all the more ugly and unmanageable.

## Elizabeth Nguyen

In her essay “The Passage from Arcade to Cinema”, Anne Friedberg explores the implications of Walter Benjamin’s use of the cinematic technique of the montage to construct a material and social history in the Arcades Project. Benjamin, she notes, explored the transformation of the commodity into a souvenir, a “memory-residue of the already passe” (50). Friedberg emphasizes Benjamin’s understanding that “memory was the commodity-fetish retailed in the arcade, a “world in miniature”” (50). The collection of memories and the theatrical transgression of spatial and temporal boundaries of the arcade had a precedent in the museum and exhibition hall, one that became compounded in the 20th century amusement parks.

In the arcade, “hats, umbrellas, gloves and cloth mantles were displayed in shop windows and vitrines as if they were antiquated objects in a natural history museum” (Friedberg, 50). Display halls and shopping arcades are the architectural vehicles for the display of collections. In museums and world’s fairs the collection of artifacts from distant places allowed the visitor to collect knowledge of other cultures as well as experience proxy realities adjacent to one another. The value of the collection depends upon the marketing of the “authentic” experience that is rooted in a unique time and place, yet expressed through the power of the fetish object. The effect of mass-reproduction that Benjamin documents is Marx’s theory of the commodity fetish, wherein the service value of a commodity becomes separable from the person delivering it (Friedberg, 54). At the world’s fair or Disney World, the spatial dimension of this separation is the experience being sold. The architectural space within which this occurs provides the boundary of the collection; within it all other boundaries are compressed for their theatrical transgression. The proximity of the false Cairo Street and the false Parisian Street are stand-in experiences rendered more intense, and therefore more authentic reproductions, by their side-by-side juxtaposition under one roof. As Koolhaas’ essay on Coney Island and Umberto Eco’s look at Disneyland in his book *Travels in Hyperreality* identify, the intense experience of the reproduction often surpasses the value of the original.

The display of endless variation in proximity also enabled power relations to be publicly enacted. As the display of colonial authority, world’s fairs controlled the image of the other for consumption by the western masses. Likewise, the museum collection displays goods gotten by conquest and the inscription of official knowledge through naming and classification. In the shopping arcade, the infinity of choices becomes a marketing device to convince the consumer of the power they exercise with their purchase. The display of artifacts emblemized various lifestyles, or experiences, available as commodities on the market. Regarding Thomas Cook’s travel guides, Friedberg notes the similarity between the mobilized gaze of the shopper and the traveler: “tourism provides an escape from boundaries, it legitimates the transgression of one’s static, stable or fixed location” (59). By purchasing a particular luxury good, the consumer buys a souvenir of their experience of desire for another lifestyle. Mass-reproduction renders the authentic experience of luxury and mobility available to a larger audience.

## Lilly Donohue

In his essay in *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas describes Coney Island as a miniature Manhattan, a testing ground for speculation on technology and planning which could later be implemented in the larger Manhattan scale. Beyond this notion of the theme park as an urban laboratory, it also serves as a simulation of the urban condition itself, appropriating the experience of density and offering an altered reflection of the city.

Coney Island was a theme park designed by necessity to accommodate the masses seeking refuge from the city. Escape by means of alleviating density in order to appreciate “the natural” was an impossibility given the number of people clamoring to the sea-side. The alternative approach of providing pleasure through a complete divorce from nature and an implementation of technology was adopted, “...it [Coney Island] has no choice but to counteract the artificiality of the new metropolis with its own Super-Natural. Instead of suspension of urban pressure, it offers intensification.” ( Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*: The Monacelli Press, 1994; p. 33)

In several cases however, Coney Island used technology not to mirror and distort the daily reality of the urban participants, but rather to reinterpret a rural experience which would otherwise be unattainable. Examples such as mechanized horse-back riding and the electric “cow-shaped milk dispenser” are interesting in that they provided a translation of a lifestyle which was foreign to the masses. In this respect, it is of note to recognize the proliferation of the contemporary theme park, which is more frequently located without proximity to urban context. In these cases, the simulation of the streets and crowding introduces a re-imagining of the city experience; the authentic condition being unknown to the spectator.

The theme park removes the opportunity for interiority; all of the facades are uninhabitable card-board creations, constructed in order demonstrate the illusion of the metropolitan landscape. Without the opportunity to gaze out from a sheltered interior environment, the participant is forced into the public street in order to observe the spectacle, mirroring the condition of the flaneur who moves undetected amidst the crowd. The scale of the street is frequently reduced in order to exaggerate the illusion of crowding, enabling the dichotomy of being publicly exposed and simultaneously anonymous that is indispensable in Walter Benjamin’s descriptions of the authentic flaneur. (Walter Benjamin. [The Flaneur], *Convolute M, The Arcades Project*, Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. The Belknap Press, 1999)

The contemporary theme park, as opposed to the earlier examples such as Coney Island, provides the opportunity to experience a translation of urbanism, offered in a context which attempts a security not possible in an actual city condition. The miniaturization and illusion of the theme park permits enclosure and therefore a degree of monitoring that would otherwise be impossible. An example such as Las Vegas, which increasingly attributes its success to sanitized simulations of other cities (Paris, Venice, New York), illustrates the mass popularity of this opportunity to engage in a reinterpretation of the urban condition. It no longer serves as an escape from the city offered through

intensification, but more frequently an opportunity to imagine the city offered in a diluted and legitimized context.