Walt Disney and the creation of emotional environments: interpreting Walt Disney’s oeuvre from the Disney studios to Disneyland, CalArts, and the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT)

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Walt Disney is arguably the most influential figure in the twentieth-century affair with animation. Although he is known for his innovations in personality animation and the full-length animation film, he is no less famous as the creator of the first theme park, Disneyland. Less well-known are his forays into the creation of educational institutions and urban landscapes. This paper argues that the notion of ‘emotional environments’, culled from contemporary research in the growing field of the history of emotions, might prove the most effective tool for interpreting the overall character of Disney’s work or oeuvre. The paper argues that thanks to the influence on him of the Hollywood studio environment that had come into operation in California in the 1920s, Disney’s animation experiments were intimately linked with his increasing efforts to fashion an emotional environment that would transfer the emotions associated with animation and motion pictures to three-dimensional realities, providing both children and adults with important confirmations of psychological reassurance associated with such critical states of self-fulfillment as happiness. To support this reading, the paper introduces the relevance of an influential body of organization and firm analysis that has developed the related concepts of experience economy, immersive environment, and art firm.

Keywords: Walt Disney; Disneyland; Hollywood studio; emotional environment; experience economy; art firm; happiness

The growing subfield of history called the history of emotions has given rise to a rich body of newer categories with which to develop its implications.1 To that list this paper proposes the category of ‘emotional environments’ – a category more limited than ‘emotional communities’ – and applies it to the
Walt Disney stands out as perhaps the most innovative entrepreneur in the area of constructing new environments largely made available by the modern technology and the medium of filmmaking. In his lifetime he was variously described as an artisan, an artist, an entertainer, a manager, a strategist, an entrepreneur, and finally ‘a visionary planner’ (Gabler 2006, 57). In seeking the appropriate vocabulary for describing the purpose and content of these Disney environments, the terms ‘emotion’ and ‘emotional’ may well prove the most relevant. This paper proposes that Disney’s objectives should be seen largely with regard to certain specific emotional results – optimism, contentment, excitement, happiness – oriented toward emotional experiences that Disney largely ascribed to the transition stage from childhood to early adolescence and maturation, a period marked by vagueness between emotional and rational motivations.

Granted that the word ‘environment’ is linked to a variety of definitions and readings, the paper assumes a relatively specific historical connection: the model for Disney’s environments was and remained the literal spaces and sitings of the Hollywood movie studio. This was a site with the purpose of bringing together a bevy of contributors, making possible the production of a film. Disney originally exploited this site in its own terms to produce the emotional experiences of the animated film, but he then turned it into the literal three-dimensional reality of a theme park, in which the model of the film experience continued to serve for the fabrication of a literal spatio-temporal reality intensifying the film experience.

What were the added advantages of doing so? While not restricted to them, this study will suggest that the most relevant set of explanations may be found in contemporary management theories of the ‘experience economy’, which valorize the collective memories extractable from such experiences. Memories that become ‘genuine’ for whole families and visitors immersing themselves in such theme parks – and the structure of which can be expanded, as Disney went on to undertake, even to educational institutions and urban developments – indicate the degree to which historians of emotion have added grounds in an age of advanced media technologies to argue the case for the highly cultured orderings of supposedly ‘hard-wired’ emotions, as well as political issues related to such facilitations of fabrication. It is in these terms that this study of Disney is meant to add to a promisingly growing field of research.

Walt Disney and the prototype of the Hollywood Studio as an emotional environment

As creator of the ‘emotional environment’ of the first animation-only studio, Walt Disney spent the rest of his life expanding what he had learned into a
series of innovative projects. These included the first modern theme park (Disneyland), a modern Gesamtkunstwerk art school (the California Institute of the Arts), and his final vision in the broader realms of city planning and urban landscaping: EPCOT, or the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow.

To date it has been difficult to properly classify Disney’s purposes and achievements in these areas. Fortunately, recent research in organization and management theory concerned with organizational aesthetics, ‘experience economies’ and ‘experience environments’ facilitates the association of Disney’s purposes with the concept of ‘emotional environments’. Such scholarship labels these environments ‘artful firms’, particularly where the latter exploit the organizational principle of ‘ensemble’. ‘Art firm’, according to Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, refers to those enterprises ‘where aesthetics is the operative management theory for the enterprise’ (Guillet de Monthoux 2004, xi). ‘Ensemble’, a term that refers to theatrical and dramaturgical groupings, has more recently been utilized by management scholars to argue the importance of place, site, and openness for the localization of those ventures and enterprises which carry a strong orientation toward the aesthetic primacy of theatricality in a variety of communal expressions. The thrust behind such research is to argue the case for a concept of the future firm called the ‘aesthetic firm’ as requiring a competitive edge, which makes full use of the human and emotional content among its members for operations that are oriented less toward conventional profit motivations than toward more general standards of ‘value-creation’ that make full use of human satisfaction and collective cooperation.

Central to such analyses is the notion of ‘immersive environments’ associated with ‘experience economies’. Experience economies are not simply concerned with consumption of goods and services, but with the offer of a total experience: ‘a series of memorable events that a company stages – as in a theatrical play – to engage the consumer (the ‘guest’) in a personal way’ (Pine and Gilmore 1999; also Schmitt, Rogers and Vrotsos 2004). These experiences are important to the degree to which they are ‘memorable’ through individuals’ immersion and interactive participation. Experience economies include not only an entertainment component, but also education, escapism, and explicitly aesthetic rewards. Examples include theme parks, ecological cafes, and forms of healing, exercise, and long-term educational systems. They can also entail applying theatrical methods to the ‘performance’ of a given firm through the use of dramaturgical methods such as Release, Collaboration, Ensemble, and Play (Austin and Devin 2003).

For Walt Disney, the prototype for an experience economy would have been the classic Hollywood studio system. Historically, that system had succeeded in spawning infrastructures comparable to a small city devoted to the construction of literal social and natural spaces for the enacting of
narratives displaced onto the two-dimensional surface of the film. Likened to the factory, it remained nonetheless a mode of operation that, unlike the typical industrial factory, ideally aimed at creating new and inimitable products (‘the dream factory’) (see Rosten 1941; Powdermaker 1950; Davis 1993; Jewell 2007). The importance of this system has been emphasized by architect and city historian Peter Hall, who argues that the future of communal spaces will be ruled by a combination of ‘artistic and intellectual creativity with technological innovativeness, on the model first created in Hollywood between 1915 and 1940’ (Hall 1998, 961 [emphasis added]).

Corresponding to the meteoric growth of California society and economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such studio cities indirectly reflected larger patterns of early Californian civic development that are worth noting. In the first place, many Southern Californian towns and colonies already contained a highly planned and urbanized character with all the characteristics of small cities, from drugstores and churches to colleges, and were ‘beautifully laid out’. In the second place, the construction boom cycle, typical of the exponential growth of Los Angeles itself in the early twentieth century, encouraged the production of instant towns, synthetic communities of an artificial kind which invariably included the required shop, church, soda fountain, filling station, school, and movie theatre, laid out overnight in quasi-‘theatrical’ fashion (McWilliams 1973, 233–4). Even more relevant for the Hollywood connection, Southern California was the site for several ambitious projects to create utopian or spiritual cities or communities. Their spiritualist standards proved sufficiently influential that certain early film celebrities claimed them as inspirations for their own careers (Brown 2002, 50 and 58).

In short, three features endemic to the Southern California of the 1920s were already implicitly at play within the Hollywood studio concept on which Walt Disney would draw: the belonging attractions of a Main Street, California; the pragmatic modernity of ready-made model cities; and the spiritualist community. The effects of these varied influences would be marked not only in the kind of animation studio that Disney came to erect, but also in the emotional environment of ‘Main Street, USA’, with which he would anchor his future vision of Disneyland.

Cultivating ‘happiness’: from the Hyperion to the Burbank Studios

From the moment of his arrival in Hollywood in 1923, Walt Disney was enthralled by the concrete reality of these studio cities. Indeed, the very fact that he would choose Hollywood over New York, at that time the center of the animation industry, indicates the degree to which Disney’s affair with animation actually formed part of broader goals more intimately connected with Hollywood as the ‘most flourishing factory of popular mythology since the Greeks’.11
Almost from the start, Disney was mainly concerned with creating a unique organization, not just the first true animation studio in Hollywood, but also one that would flourish as an environment markedly different from the typical mogul-driven vertically-integrated structures of the great studios.\textsuperscript{12} From the outset, Disney was concerned with two aspects intrinsic to this project: (1) the appropriate organization for providing (2) the animation itself. Our account will show that eventually the two were converged as the former effectively swallowed up the latter.

For the appropriate organization, Disney founded the first sustained animation studio on Hyperion Avenue in Los Angeles after 1925, followed (thanks to the blockbuster success of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in 1938) by his meticulous planning and active design of the completely new Disney Burbank Studio between 1938 and 1940. The result was a new kind of emotional environment for artists and animators, a space compared by contemporaries to a college campus or a Renaissance bottega. Disney meant the Hyperion Studio to function as an exceptional communitarian space. During the highly political Hollywood 1930s, his employees found their community in ‘the artistic enclave of Hyperion’, Disney himself calling his studio ‘a sacred space’ (cited in Gabler 2006, 161). After 1932 Disney brought in regular art classes and he methodically expanded the civic space of the studio, decorating it with bright colors, appropriately informal furniture, even a gossip paper, along with sports and parties to maintain the college campus parallel (Gabler 2006, 238). Meanwhile the new Burbank studio was intended to extend this success to the entirely new levels of ‘an animation utopia’ (or ‘a workers’ paradise’) (Gabler 2006, 288). Although Disney brought in Kem Weber for his architecture, he alone controlled the entire process.\textsuperscript{13} Once again Disney was congratulated for his ‘physical utopia’, with its comforts to encourage work stemming from joy rather than obligation: in color, palette, and variety of space patterns and with its greenery and abounding animal life, the Disney Studio meticulously avoided any suggestion of an industrial plant. Meals were taken democratically and only employee housing was lacking. Once again, the most apt parallel was an Ivy League college campus.

The purpose of the emotional environment of these studios was the creation of exemplary animation products. Although Disney became increasingly uninvolved in the actual animation work, his contribution extended from what his employees described as his consummate ‘storytelling’ – Disney’s remarkable capacity to act out the roles he wanted to have animated as well as to project his unerring sense for the animation and musical narrative he had in mind (Allan 1999, 36–7) – to his overall leadership as in effect a ‘messianic figure’ leading a ‘cult’ of devoted acolytes who all felt they were ‘disciples on a mission’ (Gabler 2006, 212). The objective of their collective efforts was to be Disney’s signal originality in
cultivating ‘personality’ for animation narrative. As Disney stressed, ‘the most important aim of any of the fine arts is to get a purely emotional response from the beholder’ (cited by Canemaker 2009 [emphasis added]). Animation of course is about the movement of figures against a background, but for Disney such movement was the lesser aspect of the more primordial significance of movement from the inanimate to the animate (‘anima’), the only genuine force to any religiosity driving Disney. Disney steadfastly experimented with such bare features to produce animation experiences at the level of what Motion Picture News at the time hailed as the first effective simulations of the ‘gestures and expressions of human beings’ (Gabler 2006, 103; see also Hench 2008, 88). At such levels Disney was then able to advance animation from the simple gag and concomitant emotion of shock to something like persuasive narratives, stories that might produce the equivalent – and more – of live-action film. Most important, he focused on the narrative most conducive to the unique potential in animation, its capacity toward realizing the wish-fulfillment of ‘happiness’.

Sigmund Freud’s biographer Ernest Jones once quoted Freud’s definition of happiness as ‘the subsequent fulfillment of a prehistoric wish’ (Jones 1953, I, 330–1 [emphasis added]). While ‘prehistoric’ in the context of Jones’ text could also mean such ‘faraway’ realms as the ancient Minoans and Egyptians whom Freud greatly admired, the primary focus is no doubt early childhood. That Disney’s master theme was increasingly characterized as ‘happiness’ is therefore not accidental, given his preoccupation with not just the realms of childhood but those of maturation over archetypal odds within natural environments replete with memories of Disney’s own nostalgic attachment to turn-of-the-century small-town America and fairy-tale Europe.

Accordingly, the end result of both Disney’s unique organization and his choice – in theme as well as in technological stylistics – of the first full-length feature animation film Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs shared the common goal of realizing ‘happiness’. ‘The most deliberated-upon movie in the history of film’, the Snow White project took up at least four years, in which Disney risked everything on what was considered the impossible task of holding an audience to an animated feature film of some 90 minutes (Gabler 2006, 274). At its height the project required some 700 animators along with a vast supportive staff in a precise production of designs and colors that began to approach serious landscaping and figurative art. Nor could Disney be sure of the success of his gamble (‘Disney’s Folly’, in the parlance of the trade papers) until he was personally able to witness at the 1937 premiere that the test case of the closing ‘Bier Scene’ generated genuine tears and empathy for what were after all mere cartoon figures given the illusion of ‘life’ and ‘aliveness’. At enormous personal financial risk, Disney had succeeded in showing how his organization of the Hyperion Studio and
the core emotion of their resultant animation product united to achieve the wish-fulfillment of ‘happiness’:

In the very organization of the studio and in the manner of production, he was creating an environment, the establishment of which was in its way every bit as important a mission for him as the cartoon feature itself. Put simply, the studio would replicate the cartoon (Gabler 2006, 240 [emphasis added]).

Disneyland as emotional environment

Unfortunately for Disney’s animation ambitions, Snow White proved too expensive to repeat.17 Moreover, during World War II the Burbank studio was turned into an efficient business operation, while unionization attempts in 1941 awakened the wrath of the anti-Communist Disney and permanently severed the earlier studio family ethos. Finally, world war and the requisitioning of the studio for military propaganda purposes inaugurated a lengthy period of struggle and sub-par work. Once the studio had to install the time clock (something detested by Disney since his Kansas City days) and hire business managers, while being forced to put the studio under bank control, Disney’s dreams for an ‘animation utopia’ were, certainly by 1946, which ranked as the nadir year for the studio, over.18

Instead Disney’s prime interest turned elsewhere. In the late 1940s Disney became fascinated with trains, building a miniature version in his office and subsequently a real train on which he himself engaged in precise craft detail work. Around the same time he began collecting miniatures and attending miniature shows. Gradually these two interests coalesced into a series of ideas: creating ‘a sort of Lilliputian Marceline’ miniature show with which he might tour the entire country – the exhibition would be called Disneylandia – and transforming the idea of a tour of the Burbank studio into a train ride circumnavigating the studio, the route of which would be landscaped with a ‘village’ including an opera house and movie theatre (Gabler 2006, 484–5).19 By 1952, Disney had formed WED Enterprises to exploit the idiom and sets of motion picture studios for his park idea, which was still restricted to the studio grounds. Eventually, partly because the Burbank city authorities were hostile to the idea, Disney radically expanded the theme park idea and selected a far more massive site in Anaheim, California.20 Disneyland in effect would be ‘essentially a giant movie set’, with each feature on the grounds designed to awaken emotional or archetypal responses common to everyone. Disneyland, the new name for the project, would be Disney’s consummate act of wish-fulfillment (Gabler 2006, 497 and 499).

As a result, Disney’s former aims of dimensionality and his dream of ‘providing a new world onscreen’ were permanently transferred to the Disneyland idea (Gabler 2006, 561). In contrast to animation proper, Disneyland would be ‘a live breathing thing’ provoking continual change
and evolution. It would be located, in Disney’s own words, ‘in cinematic
time’, a ‘cute movie set’ (cited by Gabler 2006, 564 and 533). Visiting
Disneyland would be ‘like a theatrical experience – in a word, a show’
(Hench 2008, 2 [emphasis in original]). Accordingly, the staff came to be
known as ‘Imagineers’ – fusing engineering and imagination – and at the
Walt Disney University they were coached to treat the park as movie sets
and stagings, in which ‘guests’ (the formal name for the paying customers)
would be drawn into the typical Disney storytelling experiences, enjoying
the feeling of watching a film as each main attraction represented key frames
in the extremes of an action (Gabler 2006, 435; Dunlop 1996, 29).

For his emotional environment proper, Disney ensured that entry to the
park would be substantively separated from outside reality. This passage
was intended to induce in ‘guests’ the appropriate mood, so that once these
‘guests’ came into ‘Main Street, USA’ – another invention of Disney’s – they
were ready for ‘happiness’.21 The main avenue then culminated in the magic
castle, identified as that of Snow White and eventually Sleeping Beauty, in
front of which an Italian-like piazza radiated out to four corners or ‘lands’.
Two were concerned with pure imagination wedded in part to technology:
Fantasyland and Tomorrowland; while the other two recapitulated Disney’s
unique version of the past: Frontierland and Adventureland (Gabler 2006,
29 and 499). In this format the ‘Present’ was either non-existent or
manifested as the emotional experiences of the ‘guests’.

Once again, Disney took part in every minuscule detail of Disneyland’s
construction to achieve the requisite effects, even acting out for his
Imagineers the potential reactions he anticipated from ‘his guests’. The
scale was meant to remain strictly human as pedestrian paths and their
interweavings were carefully calibrated to produce a sense of overall unity;
in 1959 the first monorail in America was inaugurated in Disneyland to
maximize this preponderance of human ambulation.

Throughout, the Disney staff was required to use theatrical terminology
to suggest that a park visit was like witnessing a performance; according to
John Hench, ‘we thought of the park as if it were a three-dimensional film’
(Hench 2008, 23). Besides customers being referred to as ‘guests’, park
employees were labeled ‘cast members’. ‘Onstage’ referred to areas open to
guests; ‘Backstage’, to those closed to them. Any large group of guests was
‘an audience’; ‘cast members’ were ‘costumers’, helping to provide the
‘show’. Overseers were ‘stage managers’ and cast members in charge of a
team had a ‘lead role’ as they followed a ‘script’ (Disneyland Park

Ideally these effects were meant to engender the ‘almost religious aura of
feeling “alive”’; in this sense it was Disney’s boldest theatrics to induce
‘happiness’ (Gabler 2006, 535).22 John Hench describes Disney’s aim as ‘an
overall feeling of optimism, threaded with adventure, romance, thrill, and
fantasy’ (Hench 2008, 56).23 Guests would acquire a feeling of ‘owning’ the
events at the park through the variety of stories they underwent and through the intensified stimuli utilized for enhancing their sense of reality. At the same time, the overall emphasis on the play dimension as something central to children and adults was meant to create a ‘ceremonial’ or ‘ritual’ aspect constituted by the park as ‘a special dedicated play space’ (Hench 2008, 65).

Disneyland proved so successful that it helped to financially secure the Disney Studio and in time inaugurated the Disney organization’s leadership in forming the kind of multi-media conglomerate into which all the classical Hollywood studios which have survived eventually had to morph (Epstein 2005). Yet, for Disney himself, Disneyland was merely the beginning. At best it was ‘just a prototype’ for what Disney now wanted primarily to design: ‘an entire city’ (Gabler 2006, 573).

The final vision: Toward the Disney ‘city’ (CalArts and EPCOT)

In 1958 Disney began talks with his WED staff on his newest project: ‘a City of the Arts’, or ‘the Seven Arts City’ (Gabler 2006, 573). Disney hoped to turn the Chouinard Art Institution, with which he had maintained close personal and professional relations since the 1920s and which during the 1950s was undergoing severe financial strains, into ‘the broadest possible creative education’ (Gabler 2006, 592). When Chouinard and the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music merged in 1961 thanks to Disney, it was Disney who gave the merger its name as the California Institute of the Arts (‘CalArts’) and the land on which that Institute was eventually developed after 1969 in Valencia, California.

Originally Disney contemplated a city of shopping and dining around a complex of art programs. By the early 1960s he had given up the idea of the city as too costly, but he still pursued the idea of a school (Gabler 2006, 592). Even in his later vision, Disney saw the school as multidimensional, realizing, according to CalArts official statements, the Gesamtkunstwerk vision of German composer Richard Wagner. At the very least Disney expected to bring together all the major arts under one roof, with full use of the latest technological communication tools, and to turn out professionals who had learned all facets of filmmaking as Disney himself generously understood it. Disney even set up a model of CalArts to publicize his efforts at winning support and financial contributions.

Still, Disney’s ambitions remained fired in the direction of creating an actual city and not just ‘a faux utopia’ like Disneyland (Gabler 2006, 574). Accordingly, turning to the task of a Disney World in Florida, Disney’s aims were no longer simply to reproduce a more splendid Disneyland on the East Coast, but to build his utopian city adjacent to the theme park. In effect, Disney took his former City of the Arts project and injected it into his version of Disney World (Gabler 2006, 604).
Disney’s final project, the ‘Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow’ (EPCOT), proved his boldest vision to move beyond theme and resort park to a real community, presumably thus truly focusing ‘on the public need and happiness of people’. Drawing on Ebenezer Howard’s Garden Cities of Tomorrow (1902), which had been recently reissued in 1965, and on The Heart of Our Cities (1964) by Victor Gruen, often regarded as the father of the modern supermall (Howard 1951; Gruen 1964), Disney exploited both plans, especially Howard’s radial system, which corresponded perfectly with his own lifelong penchant for the Circle (including indeed his choice of the shaping of the original Mickey Mouse figure!)\(^{29}\), which he thought gave people a sense of orientation (‘they know where they are at all times’) and thus induced the important human quality of reassurance which had been such a central component in the envisioning of Disneyland (Mannheim 2002, 11). Gruen meanwhile encouraged Disney to conceive of EPCOT in terms of a City of Tomorrow, cultivating a continual state of becoming. The result was ‘a series of circular maps and sections that project a strong rhetorical image of wholeness, unity, and embrace, of harmony, safety, and underlying order’ (Marling 1997, 151).

In contrast to the original Disneyland, where the theme park had been quickly surrounded by the unsightly growth of parasitical enterprises he could not control, Disney made sure that his Florida project would encompass some 27,000 acres, compared to the original 160 acres in Anaheim. This vast property, extending over two Florida counties, was then first sketched out in the Disney Seventh Preliminary Master Plot Plan of 1966, a rare case of an actual drawing by Disney himself, rather than his illustrators, to diagram his overall project. The sketch reveals a vast amount of green space with EPCOT at the center and the ‘Magic Kingdom’ – the Disneyland theme park recapitulation – relegated to the north, while the other features such as an industrial park and airport were located to the south.\(^{30}\) EPCOT would consist of two cities, one of ‘Yesterday’ and one of ‘Tomorrow’. Four zones shaped by a radial plan would start with the inner central commercial zone and work outward through the high-rise apartment ring, the greenbelt and recreation area, and the outlying low-density residential area, all linked by monorail and the whole unit further linked to an outlying satellite community and the industrial park.

The town center of 50 acres would be designed for some 20,000 residents.\(^{31}\) Its themed shopping mall included a landmark hotel and convention center at its core, along with international-themed retail areas, theatres, restaurants, and nightlife attractions, both for the residents and for the anticipated millions of visitors. It would be enclosed from the humid heat of Florida weather by a bubble and have a motion picture set design somewhat similar to the more recently added New Orleans Square in Disneyland. South of EPCOT an industrial park covering some 1,000 acres would be developed along the lines of the Stanford Industrial Park of 1951,
or the kind of Silicone Valley industrial parks that have proliferated since the onset of the digital age.

Given that EPCOT was intended as a real community connected with a theme park, a central focus of concern remained legal issues of property and control. Disney was able to secure Florida state legislation that established a multifunction, multicity, and multicounty special district with many financial rights passed on to The Reedy Creek Improvement District. In effect the legislation removed the project from control by Orlando voters and officials, but it certainly did not settle the question of what would happen when EPCOT became inhabited (Gabler 2006, 609 [note *]; Mannheim 2002, 106). To describe the result as a ‘Vatican City of leisure and entertainment’ simply raised a number of issues related to Disney’s understanding of what ‘community’ proper entailed for a structure combining residents and visitors (Mannheim 2002, 107).\(^32\)

What does seem clear is that Disney continued to view EPCOT as consisting of a community of tenants. Obviously he wanted to retain full control, but that weakened his vision of a community in a continued state of becoming and also raised the question of lack of stakeholder commitment. In any case, legally Disney could not control voting, a right reasserted by the US Supreme Court, whatever the residential permanency of his residents. Moreover, if, as has been suggested, his expectation was that residency would be limited to one or one-and-a-half years, it seems difficult to imagine much sense of community stability, one of the stated aims of his grand plan. At best, one can merely record Disney’s plan as a two-tier system of government, with developers retaining authority over town planning matters while democratic control over other civil features was to be left in the hands of residents (Mannheim 2002, 114).

Remaining questions touch on the nature of the inner life of such a community. Since EPCOT was both a ‘showcase’ and a community, how would residents expect to comport themselves? In an environment designed to be neighborhood- and pedestrian-friendly, it would be difficult for such residents to ‘dress up’ for visitors every time they ambled to the local store. Nor was it easy to envisage how the rustic flavor of daily life might fit in with Disney’s equal expectations of a state of continued technological transformation and growth. Finally, how would the functions of community be kept separate from those of a ‘model-city’ attraction?\(^33\)

Disney, it seems clear, was just getting started on the implementation of his grand vision. As in the case of his other enterprises, further important adjustments could have been expected from his agile imagination. At all events, EPCOT was Disney’s last and most extensive obsession, right to his death. In October 1966 he appeared in a film pushing EPCOT and was still thinking of EPCOT as ‘the overriding passion of his life’ at the time of his death in December 1966 (Gabler 2006, 621). Eventually an EPCOT did become part of Disney World, but more as an international fair than as
Disney’s City of Tomorrow (Gabler 2006, 631 [note *]). Although Disney’s brother Roy did later look at a more developed scheme for EPCOT championed by Imagineers, Disney’s vision was dropped as too difficult, financially and legally. Undoubtedly, however, the major reason for abandoning EPCOT was the permanent loss of the charismatic Disney presence in driving that vision.34

**Walt Disney, Richard Wagner, and experience economies**

As proponents of an ‘experience economy’, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore leave no doubt about the founder of the whole phenomenon: ‘We trace the beginnings of this experience expansion to one man and the company he founded: Walt Disney’. For Pine and Gilmore, Disney was the first to create ‘a living, immersive cartoon world’.35 He taught through the exemplar of Disneyland that if entertainment, education, escapism, happiness, and explicitly aesthetic rewards were brought together into a single setting, any plain space could be turned into a space appropriate for ‘staging an experience’. Full immersion and interactive participation gave ‘guests’ the freedom to be fully in the experience, thus undergoing that personalized and emotionalized intensity which makes experience ‘memorable’ (Pine and Gilmore 1999, 2, 5, 31–40, and 42).36 Similar arguments have been made by Bernd Schmitt, David Rogers and Karen Vrotsos (2004, 239) in their advocacy of an ‘experience culture’ as they study such cases as cooking, the art business, and the phenomenon of Las Vegas. From these observations it is a relatively easy step to focus on the ‘show’ or ‘theatrical’ nature of such immersions and to propose the injection of theatrical practices and emotional experiences into the organizational firm or enterprise itself.37

Such analyses also often claim that in fact contemporary societal structures and economies are increasingly headed in this direction for a variety of reasons, such as the critical characteristics defining the new information world or ‘internet galaxy’ (Castells 2001). In that case, one would have to grant that Disney was being a seer of sorts with his vision for Disneyland as a ‘theme’ park rather simply an ‘amusement’ park, and his commitment to both the technological ubiquities of Tomorrowland and the emotional reassurances of Main Street USA and the Magic Castle were quite prescient in anticipating contemporary social realities, whatever the evaluative judgments made concerning them.

Yet, although Disney certainly was not oblivious to the entrepreneurial moment – one important reason why these management scholars are drawn to his oeuvre – a distinction may still be drawn between Disney’s intentions and what others have made of the ‘Disney’ phenomenon since his death. To clarify this distinction, it may help to consider the parallels with another art-cultural entrepreneurial phenomenon where the ‘art’, however ‘managerial’ a venture, still won out over the narrowly entrepreneurial.
Officially invoked by the California Institute of the Arts as a main inspiration for Disney’s aims at CalArts, Richard Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk project has allowed Disney critics to point out similarities between Wagner’s dream of a union of the arts and Disney’s animated films synthesizing music, drama, comedy, drawing, and dialogue into an aesthetic whole (see Watts 1997, 124). Nor can one miss the striking resemblances between the Disneyland Castle and Neuschwanstein Castle erected by Wagner’s greatest admirer Ludwig II of Bavaria. Neuschwanstein, which Ludwig erected as an homage to Richard Wagner, was meant to recall both the medieval Bavarian order of the Knights of Schwangau and Wagner’s Swan King, Lohengrin.

In fact, the opera Lohengrin (1848) was also Wagner’s last composition in the conventional operatic medium of his day. From that stage on he resolved on his own version of an emotional environment through the experience of what he termed the ‘music drama’. Wagner claimed that bringing together all the major arts in a public setting had been the ancient Greeks’ greatest accomplishment in the dramaturgical form known as tragedy (with comedy later added), because it had generated a collective experience (Gemeinsam-kunstwerk) in shared pathos and catharsis. Wagner thought that with the technical and emotive advantages of the modern symphonic form, his version could better the Greeks’ by plumbing more deeply into moods and feelings not otherwise approachable through prose or even poetry. In effect, music would allow the natural ‘tonal cry’ of primordial humanity (‘the purely human’) to be rediscovered and articulated after millennia of presumed suppression. And, like the Greeks, Wagner went on to create a site of pilgrimage and temple to his art, where this experience could be separated from everyday reality. The Bayreuth Festival, Wagner’s ‘Gralsburg der Kunst’, became the most important of such sites since the ancient Greek Theatre of Dionysos, and it was accompanied by Wagner’s grand plans for his ‘sanctuary’, which included a supportive journal, societies of patrons, a musical school to develop training in naturalness of voice and gesture, fan clubs, spa atmosphere, unique auditorium, and educational seminars (Chytry 1989, 301–5). Accordingly, Pierre Guillet de Monthoux has persuasively argued that Richard Wagner launched the very idea of an ‘art firm’ in European society and management. With his Bayreuth temple to art, he became ‘the pioneer of the modern art enterprise’ (Guillet de Monthoux 2004, 121). Guillet de Monthoux’s nomenclature furnishes a helpful distinction between mere enterprise – or an ‘experience economy’ – and the ‘art firm’, the former remaining primarily imbedded in entertainment while the latter discharges aesthetic surplus into even the entrepreneurial character which sustains it (Guillet de Monthoux 2004, 118). Wagnerian standards, it may be conceded, furnish a somewhat elevated test for the Disney oeuvre. Yet the presence of such a category as the Wagnerian ‘art firm’ weakens the exclusive appropriation by the ‘experience
economy’ management scholars of the significance of Disney’s oeuvre. Where Wagner had looked to opera – the standing performance medium of his day – for his redemptive domain to regain the ‘purely human’, Disney committed himself to the key medium of the twentieth century, motion pictures, to develop a form within filmmaking, animation, that could optimize displays of human and natural emotions. If Wagner’s metaphysic ultimately rests on the primordial tonal cry, Disney’s goes back to the realms of childhood and its maturation. Disney’s intuition receives support in recent studies concentrating on the first five years of childhood, which note that infant brains are mainly ruled by the occipital cortex (concerned with the visual world) and the parietal cortex (adjusting to new events), and that both cortices also light up in adults while they are engrossed in watching a movie.41 Disney may have been an astute exploiter of these characteristics both in children and in adults when he formed narratives that both highlighted the perils such a brain underwent in reality and furnished ultimate reassurances of not just satisfactory but happy – that is, primordially wish-fulfilling – endings.

Equally important is the significance of Disney’s lifelong fixation on the physical and emotional environment or site, the motion-picture studio, in which motion pictures were actually made. As already noted, from the moment that Disney arrived in Hollywood, he felt at home in the Hollywood studio as the necessary incubator for his own, as well as his fellow animators’ and the audience’s, deepest dreams. Disney developed increasingly sophisticated renditions of such emotional environments via his Hyperion and Burbank studios, but the same standard led him to create Disneyland as well as his City of the Arts and the Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow. At these latter levels, some of his closest collaborators, such as head Imagineer John Hench, saw fit to claim a ‘ceremonial’ or ‘ritual’ core to the emotional environments Disney had fashioned. Throughout these projects Disney’s emotional environments were meant to match the movie experience of defined sets, unfolding narratives, clusters of actors, and eudaimonic arrivals.42 Even his last EPCOT project has been aptly described as a city that is ‘more like a movie set, suffused with feeling, sentiment, and mood’ (Marling 1997, 151).43

At the same time, Disney retained his commitment to the ultimate criterion of animation. As Ken Peterson, a Disney animator, has underscored, what is central to this criterion is not just movement, but life, liveliness, aliveness; something driving Disney throughout his career (cited in Gabler 2006, 176). In his Symposion, Plato offers a definition of poiesis (poieisis) as ‘any action which is responsible for something emerging from non-being (me onto) to being (to on)’ (Plato, Symposion, 205b). This is not exactly the equivalent of the meaning of animation as the ‘movement from the inanimate to the animate’, but it is close. Disney reveled in the experience of the aliveness that motion-picture films promised and, often
enough, delivered. Throughout his life, Disney tried to induce, provoke, and encourage its manifestations at the level of both the ‘production’ (the studio) and the ‘performative’ (theatre, theme park, art university, experimental city): at times he even hoped to fuse them, as in Disneyland. If his palette was limited to certain childhood and maturation themes as well as to narrower American Midwest tastes, it still intuitively recognized an important stage of human emotions that merited cultivation and deserved ultimate reassurance.

It has been suggested that for early childhood the heightened states of absorption enjoyed by children allow for greater plasticity and a more highly attuned capacity to take in new information, with obvious evolutionary advantages. In particular, these experiences prepare humans to a later appreciation and creation of art. This is the area in which Disney ultimately thought that he was making humane contributions, by furnishing appropriate works as well as sites for their nurturance, both in the children themselves and in adults who would benefit from a rekindling of emotional memories tied to this period of childhood maturation.

It may be granted that Disney’s actual trajectory into these realms could be problematic. In addition, important issues remain regarding his oeuvre which this paper stops short of addressing. Disneyland may have been described as the ‘town square of Los Angeles’, but the fact remains that such a ‘commons’ is only open to experience for those able to afford its entry ticket. This issue of public versus private spaces, of profit versus not-for-profit motivations, segues soon enough into larger questions of distinctions between ‘natural’ versus ‘induced’ or ‘fabricated’ emotions. Indeed, in the long term such themes may require more directly ideological analysis. Yet even such analysis benefits from its prior location in a history of emotional environments which draws on historical samples of such environments in order to develop appropriate taxonomies. The case of Walt Disney’s oeuvre offers robust material to a project of this order.

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Notes
1. See Plamper (2010) for a judicious set of interviews with leading contributors William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein and Peter Stearns, and the varied terms of art that are now in play in this subfield.
2. This paper is concerned with the historical figure Walter Elias Disney rather than the brand ‘Disney’, the latter referring to the expanding enterprises spawned by his more business-oriented brother Roy (see Thomas 1998).

3. As educator when contemplating his radical school of the arts in the future California Institute of the Arts, Disney, perhaps half-seriously, saw himself teaching as a ‘storyman’. John Hench emphasizes Disney’s ‘innate talent for storytelling and his understanding of human nature’ (Hench 2008, 138).


5. Contributors include Rob Austin and Lee Devin; John Dobson; Pierre Guillet de Monthoux; Joseph Pine and James Gilmore; Virginia Postrel; Bernd Schmitt, David Rogers and Karen Vrotsos; and Antonio Strati. See also the important new scholarly journal issued by The Aesthetic Project through the University of Essex: Aesthesis: International Journal of Art and Aesthetics in Management and Organizational Life (2007–2010), and the related collection by Vickers and King (forthcoming).

6. ‘Aesthetic firm’ is a term coined by John Dobson (1999) to contrast with the conventional ‘technical firm’ of vertical integration as well as with the ‘moral firm’, which simply aspires to add an ethical edge to the technical firm.

7. As Aida Hozic notes with regard to the Hollywood studio, ‘competitors around the world recognized the studio – the physical plant – as the key to American superiority’ (Hozic 2001, 58). See also Scott (2005).

8. McWilliams (1973, 217), particularly citing the example of Redlands, California.

9. For the Point Loma ‘templed’ or ‘white city’ in San Diego, see Greenwalt (1978, 47). For the Krotona colony in Hollywood see Ross (2004, Appendix, 1–22) and more generally Ross (1989).

10. Future observers of the California scene such as British author Aldous Huxley invariably remarked on the general resemblance between Southern California and a grand motion picture set (McWilliams 1973, 344).


12. Colonel William Selig had already recognized that by working entirely inside the studio, filmmakers were not simply protected from rain and inclement climatic conditions, but were allowed to reproduce reality in any way they saw fit (Hozic 2001, 57).

13. Weber was actually a mere designer who had done sets at Paramount (Gabler 2006, 322).

14. Disney never showed interest in any institutional religious affiliation.

15. Herbert Marcuse singled out this definition as one of Freud’s ‘most advanced formulations’ (Marcuse 1961, 186). If we recall as well the French writer Stendhal’s definition of ‘beauty as ‘the promise of happiness’ (la promesse du bonheur) – a definition greatly admired by Friedrich Nietzsche – one might telescope the two definitions accordingly: beauty as ‘the promise of the subsequent fulfillment of a prehistoric wish’.

16. Perhaps one explanation for the exploitation of such realms in the later Disney theme parks. See also Whitley (2008).

17. Disney’s most sophisticated venture in animation would be Fantasia (1940) (originally called The Concert Feature), meant ‘as an entirely new kind of theatrical experience’ to transform Disney’s choices of classical composition
into audience experiences of pure form and sound, even to the extent of introducing a new sound technology called Fantasound to envelop the audience. For Disney, abstract art was ‘what you feel when you see something. It’s an impression you get, it’s the shape an observed incident takes in your own mind’ (cited in Miller 1957, 243; see also Allan 1999, 104; Gabler 2006, 309).

18. As Disney wryly put it, ‘My wife used to accuse me of running a Communist outfit, well, all that is over now’ (cited in Gabler 2006, 377).


20. Disney’s intuition was excellent: as Charles Phoenix notes, ‘If ever there was a perfect time and place to create an entirely new concept of family entertainment, it was Southern California in the 1950s’ (Phoenix 2001, 149). The original model for Disney’s vision of Main Street was undoubtedly his boyhood hometown of Marceline, Missouri. Disney also admired Thornton Wilder’s version of Main Street in the latter’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play Our Town (1938) (Hench 2008, 10). Interestingly, although located in New Hampshire, Wilder’s fictional town may have reflected his upbringing in the carefully designed neighborhood of Elmwood in the Californian university city of Berkeley (Harrison 1983, 19–22 and 30–6).

21. At the same time, in ‘The Disneyland Story’, a 1954 60-minute infomercial on the new TV series Disneyland and the future Anaheim Disneyland, Disney described Disneyland as a place not only of ‘happiness’ but also of ‘knowledge’.

22. Hench can only think of the artist Salvador Dali as someone who could match Disney’s optimism (besides, of course, Disney’s own creation Mickey Mouse!) (Hench 2008, 138).

23. For details, see Hench (2008, 56–7).

24. For his part, Hench takes the position (similar to that taken by German poet Friedrich Schiller in his Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1794–1795)) that ‘play may precede human culture. I believe it is vital to our survival as human beings’.

25. California Institute of the Arts (2005–2009) provides a film version of the grand plans for CalArts as conceived by Disney. The original site in Los Angeles proved too ambitious and CalArt was later developed north of Los Angeles in the community of Valencia. After Walt’s death in 1966, his brother Roy persisted in pushing the project, although the late 1960s and early 1970s were a difficult period of clashes between his and the students’ personal ethics (see Thomas 1998, 321–6).

26. As Gabler notes, this was ‘the only real appeal to him’ of constructing a Disney World in Florida (Gabler 2006, 608). This perspective might be contrasted to the subsequent proliferation of Disneylands throughout the world by the multi-media conglomerate developed after Disney’s death in 1966 by his brother Roy.

27. One of the explicitly stated primary goals of EPCOT (Mannheim 2002, 6). See also the useful EPCOT Chronology (Mannheim 2002, 185–9). See also Mumford (1961).


29. Compared to Howard’s Garden City of 32,000 inhabitants, although sometimes the figure projected for EPCOT rose to 60,000 or even 100,000 by 1980 (Gabler 2006, 609). These figures might be compared to those for the ideal polis of some
50,000 as suggested by Aristotle, and also around 50,000 by Plato (based on some 5,000 ‘citizens’).

32. Ironically, although EPCOT was never built, it was the idea of EPCOT that finally won over the Florida legislature to provide for a special district, allowing for the erection of Walt Disney World (see Thomas 1998, 306–8).

33. These concerns are raised in Mannheim (2002, 9, 113, and 123). The more recent construction of the residency Celebration in Florida does not match the EPCOT community concept.


36. As John Hench notes, the Disney theme parks were meant to be as real as a story film through connecting visitors’ experience ‘to their own emotions and memories’ (Hench 2008, 124).

37. The best account remains Austin and Devin (2003).

38. For the color and music components, see especially Hench (2008).

39. As John Hench makes clear, Disney’s Castle ‘was inspired by the royal castle of Neuschwanstein in Bavaria’. And as he adds, it ‘set a pattern’ for all the other Magic Kingdoms in the Disney parks (Hench 2008, 53). See also Smith (2007).


41. See the recent study by Gopnik (2009).

42. Hench (2008) is particularly useful in detailing the manner in which the film experience is imbedded in the Disneyland experience.

43. My thanks to Richard Benefield for this reference.

44. See Gopnik (2009) for more empirical details.

45. See the judicious account in Watts (1997, 442–5); also Brode (2004).


47. Indeed, for this author the topic forms part of a larger project to formulate and clarify a faculty of thought called ‘cytherics’, defined in two prior works as the ‘sighting and siting of aphrodisian – that is, aesthetic-erotic – environments’ (see Chytry 2005; 2009).

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