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Walt's Theme Park Vision Put Mouse Ears on America

The Anaheim attraction has cast a five-decade spell over our culture and transformed the entertainment industry.

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To build his dream theme park in Anaheim a half-century ago, Walt Disney borrowed against his life insurance policy and cashed in property, including a vacation home in Palm Springs, to pay the \$17-million construction bill.

When the Anaheim theme park opened July 17, 1955 — with cranky Southern Californians fanning themselves on a sweltering hot day — toilets clogged, the food ran out and women's high heels sunk into wet asphalt. Disney officials still call it "Black Sunday."

But from the start, there would be no denying the world's infatuation with Disneyland, a rite of passage for millions of vacationing families. In the 50 years since Walt Disney leveled Anaheim orange groves, the park has left an oversized imprint on American culture, influencing everything from family entertainment to shopping malls to corporate branding.

"There's still nothing to compare it to," said Jamie O'Boyle, senior analyst for the Philadelphia-based Center for Cultural Studies and Analysis. "It is a cultural magnet for people.... Walt didn't build an amusement park. He really built the first virtual reality."

Others are less flattering, saying the park is too artificially controlled and idealized.

Italian author Umberto Eco suggested that Disneyland is "the Absolute Fake." After facing tooth-baring alligators at Disneyland's Jungle Cruise, Eco was disappointed at seeing none while taking a paddle-wheel steamer down the Mississippi.

"You risk feeling homesick for Disneyland, where the wild animals don't have to be coaxed," Eco wrote in the 1975 essay, "The City of Robots."

Indeed, no one has masterminded — and capitalized on — fantasy and illusion like the Walt Disney Co., a \$30-billion entertainment powerhouse that has transformed theme park rides into top-grossing movies and a hockey flick into a sports franchise.

The original Anaheim park alone attracts more than 13 million tourists annually and last year generated \$1.9 billion in spending. More than 78.6 million pairs of Mickey Mouse ears have been purchased by fans — enough to

adorn every child in America.

Disney constructed his dream in less than a year, turning 160 acres of orange and walnut trees into Sleeping Beauty's castle, a jungle river and rocket ships that people ride to the moon.

A resident who left Anaheim in the spring of 1954 and returned a year later "would have beheld one of the most amazing changes during his life," recalled Anaheim's former Chamber of Commerce manager Earnest W. Moeller in a 1980 historical paper for the local library's archives.

"No distinguishable landmark remained, the neighborhood was obliterated.... And if he were to enter the gate, walk into the park hidden by an earth-filled berm, he would have been shocked to learn the world's most advanced amusement park had risen."

The accomplishment was all the more remarkable because amusement parks were a struggling industry. Even the biggest ones, like Coney Island, still mostly targeted young people hoping to steal a kiss on the Ferris wheel.

"They were, as Walt thought of them, sort of rundown places with very scary people," O'Boyle said.

Disney elevated the amusement park into a "theme park," the next step in family entertainment.

"Disneyland captured everyone's imagination and really revolutionized the leisure industry all over the world," said Phil Hetteema, former senior vice president of attraction development for Universal Studios.

"They added that layer of story and experience above and beyond nicely designed pavilions and rides that had bright lights.... Whether you wanted to be a spaceman or go to Tom Sawyer Island and be a frontiersman or imagine battling pirates, you could do that — all in one day."

Disney wasn't the first to do this. A few miles away, Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park transported people to the Old West. But Disney's park was grander and more technically advanced, with an unprecedented marketing punch that used a television show to bring people behind the scenes of Disneyland's construction.

Disney cashed in on the happy days of the 1950s. He benefited from post-war prosperity, the baby boom and the creation of interstate highways that put Disneyland within reach of the rest of the country.

In the years since, others have followed Disneyland's template: Sea World, Universal Studios — even Las Vegas, which adopted themed hotels and beckoned families with roller coasters and magicians. But none duplicated Disneyland, which set the gold standard for the industry. Nearly 500 million people have poured through the gates, making it the most popular amusement park in the world. Since its opening, experts and laypeople alike have analyzed Disneyland's success and significance. Disneyland has inspired hundreds of books, articles in obscure academic journals, and college classes dissecting its mystique and evaluating its impact.

The modern museum, for instance reflects the Disneyland experience by featuring special lighting, music, and full-immersion exhibits. At banks and airports, people wait in "switch-back" lines pioneered by Disney. And Disneyland brought the word "guest" into the lexicon of customer service.

Disneyland has influenced Madison Avenue too, giving lessons in corporate synergy, branding and cross-promotions. Think Happy Meals, Kodak Moments, The Lion King on Broadway.

Margaret King, who studies Disney and wrote the entry on "theme parks" for the Guide to United States Popular Culture, said it's all part of the "Disney effect."

"It's huge. Disney has just permeated our culture. It's almost easier to look for something that has *not* been affected," she said, than to list its contributions.

Disneyland's Main Street inspired cities to inject downtown revivals with old-town ambience. It contributed to the design of the modern-day shopping mall by linking stores so shoppers can meander from one to the next without stepping outside. And mimicking Disneyland, today's malls grew into entertainment complexes with movie theaters, restaurants and, in some cases, amusement park rides.

Architects and urban planners greeted Disneyland with rave reviews in journals and at professional conferences. One called Disneyland "a symbolic American Utopia."

Disneyland was calculated down to the last meticulous and manipulative detail.

High fences insulate parkgoers from the outside world. Trash cans were devised with lids that keep garbage out of sight. Hidden speakers deliver cheerful music to every corner. Candy shop and bakery exhaust fans are directed to blow cinnamon and vanilla scents onto Main Street.

"What we create is a 'Disney Realism,' sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements," Disney designer and artist John Hench said in a 1975 company handbook.

"We create a world they can escape to ... to enjoy for a few brief moments ... a world that is the way they would like to think it would be."

So intense is Disneyland's effort to perpetuate its Pollyanna image that officials delayed Anaheim police for 90 minutes in a Disney conference room when a metal cleat snapped loose from the deck of the Columbia Sailing Ship and fatally struck a tourist on Christmas Eve 1998. Police were admitted only after workers had mopped up the blood and carted away the evidence.

In nurturing its reputation, Disneyland has long enforced its own sense of morals and social convention. And it leaned on the side of conservatism. Alcohol is served only inside the exclusive, members-only Club 33. Employees, known as cast members, wear first-name nametags and are indoctrinated in "The Disney Look" — defined as "clean, natural, polished and professional, and [which] avoids 'cutting edge' trends or extreme styles." An 18-page guidebook bans frowning, gum chewing, slouching and cell-phone gabbing.

Mustaches were banned until 1998, even though Walt sported a neatly groomed mustache. And there are still rules dictating socks (solid with no logos), undergarments (must be worn), and nail polish (no bright shades like hot pink or coral).

In 2003, officials allowed hoop earrings — as long as they were no larger than a dime. Double-piercings remain banned.

Changing tastes and social standards affected not just cast members, but the attractions themselves.

The park opened in 1955 with 18 ticketed attractions. Many are still there today, including Autopia, Mad Tea Party, Jungle Cruise and Mr. Toad's Wild Ride.

But to stay relevant, the park constantly evolved.

Michael Jackson as Captain EO came and went, as did the suddenly obsolete House of the Future and Rocket to the Moon. Pirates of the Caribbean caved to political correctness, with wench-chasing pirates chasing young

maidens carrying plates of food, making them gluttonous, not lustful. Jungle Cruise skippers were forced to hang up their holsters in 2001, only to return the guns this year in a nod to nostalgia.

The newest attraction is decidedly high-tech: Buzz Lightyear Astro Blasters, a "Toy Story"-inspired ride targeting the Internet generation. It blends the ride with a shoot-'em-up video game, and allows people at home to play along, online. At the end of the ride, photos can be e-mailed home or to friends.

Some critics say this "Disney Realism" is actually "Disney-fication" — a veneer that gives everything a more positive glow at the expense of history or reality. In the 1950s, one of the few representations of blacks was an Aunt Jemima greeting diners at her Pancake House. Attractions like "Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln" gloss over weighty subjects like slavery; in "it's a small world," Chinese children are represented wearing coolie hats.

As a result, political protesters found Disneyland the perfect stage because its Utopian backdrop contrasted starkly with such social problems as war and civil rights.

Among the memorable incidents: the summer 1970 invasion of 300 Yippies — members of the counterculture Youth International Party founded by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin. The long-haired protesters swarmed Tom Sawyer Island and hoisted the Viet Cong flag. Eighteen were arrested, mostly for gate crashing or disturbing the peace. "We just ran around, went on rides, got high and made noise," said protester Mike Jones, now 60 and living in Idaho. "It sort of broke social conventions. It was great social protest, great street theater and it was fun to shake up the Disney establishment."

Disney was chided for conservative values but came to tolerate, if not welcome, social change.

In the 1990s, "Gay Days" were celebrated at Disney parks with the company's tacit approval, attracting thousands of gays and triggering boycotts from the Southern Baptists and the conservative American Family Assn.

Both groups ended their protests this year.

Despite such brouhahas, Disneyland's growing popularity was undisputed and reached far beyond Middle America.

It has attracted world leaders, Olympians, astronauts and movie stars.

For Japanese Emperor Hirohito, a 1975 visit to Disneyland and photo with Mickey Mouse — broadcast live to Japan — helped re-shape his image from military man to aging grandfather, and cemented Japanese infatuation with all things Disney.

Even Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev clamored to visit Disneyland in 1959 — and threw a temper tantrum when denied entry by U.S. officials citing security concerns.

"Just now, I was told I couldn't go to Disneyland," Khrushchev said during a speech in Los Angeles. "I ask, why not? Do you have rocket launching pads there? Is there an epidemic of cholera? Have gangsters taken over the place?"

His fit highlighted Disneyland's importance in American culture, that it was the quintessential American experience. The Disney marketing team exploited that notion, and took it one step further — suggesting in an advertising campaign launched in 1987 that a day at Disneyland was the most fitting reward for a sports championship.

New York Giants quarterback Phil Simms, having just led his team to victory in Super Bowl XXI, shouted one

last triumphant — and enduring— exclamation as he left the field: "I'm going to Disneyland!"

It became part of the national lexicon. "It's this generation's way to capture achievement in a phrase," said sports marketing consultant David Carter. "They've somehow been able to link heroes and dreams [to Disneyland]."

But for 50 years, Disneyland's essential mission is unchanged.

For Troy and Maricel Doerschel, it provided an escape — a bit of comfort — in the days after Sept. 11, 2001, when all flights were grounded and they found themselves stranded on vacation at Disneyland, 1,500 miles away from home.

They longed to be home in Seattle, but Disneyland turned out to be the next best thing. "In a sad way, I was so happy to be at Disneyland," said Troy Doerschel, 34, an office manager. "When you see the gates and you see the flowers — the flowers in the shape of Mickey — you almost feel like you're going to lift up off the ground and fly."

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