Themed Origins: In the Garden

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The discourse which surrounds themed architecture often treats it as foreign to conventions of architectural design and history. This is an undeserved exile from so-called "serious" architecture because themed architecture stands on firm historical ground as well as proposes a critical vision for understanding social, urban and exurban trends. Themed architecture aids in mapping the future of public spaces and urban organizational principles. The garden and garden theory proposed that particular settings could serve as themed environments which amused people by transporting them to exotic places and different historical periods. The conceptual base for themed architecture and its role in society demonstrated in the garden was critical to the World's Fairs, the Urban Parks and City Beautiful Movements in the United States and to current global themed architecture. This paper will set the discussion of theming in a specific historical and critical framework through a directed consideration of garden design until and including the 1851 Crystal Palace in order to gain understanding of and access to a discourse about themed projects in the context of architectural academia and professional pursuits.

Comments from architects expose a conflict architectural and social critics face when regarding themed architecture. Critics do not acknowledge and examine historical content, but treat the projects as spontaneous phenomena. The following excerpts expose the debate, or lack thereof, that exists surrounding themed architecture.

> "Modern architects have worked to keep formal and social concerns separate rather than together. In dismissing Levittown, Modern architects, who have characteristically promoted the role of social sciences in architecture, reject whole sets of dominant social patterns because they do not like the architectural consequences of those patterns. These architects reject the very heterogeneity of our society that makes the social sciences relevant to architecture in the first place."[1]

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour promoted critical dialogue which should now be expanded to include issues which surround themed architecture.

While considering the new Las Vegas resort New York-New York, Wytold Rybczynski wrote: "But as an architect can I take it seriously? At one level, the answer is obviously no. Although this is a real building—a *big* real building—it is more like a movie set than like a work of architecture. To paraphrase the art critic Robert Hughes, New York-New York is to architecture as telephone sex is to sex."[2]

On the one hand there is a championing of popular icons in a domestic context as the symbols of social structures essential for architectural discourse and design while, on the other, there is a refusal to discuss a popular, themed project in a critical manner.

Taste cultures have influenced perceptions of themed architecture, categorizing it as being in the realm of "popular culture." Herbert Gans, in his apologia of popular culture states "that popular culture reflects and expresses the aesthetic and other wants of many people (thus making it culture and not just commercial menace)" and makes "...an argument against the idea that only a cultural expert knows what is good for people and for society."[3] In the late 1700's, definitions of taste cultures were bluurred as the strong middle class emerged, discussions concerning the great public sphere circulated and modern representative government was established. The middle class usurped power and style from the aristocracy and, in turn, made it accessible to the working classes. The emergence of popular leisure time and activities as a focus for design and social constructs promoted a consideration for typologies and strategies to accommodate the new pastimes.

Leisure architecture in its popular form is critically linked to consumption and commercialization. The definition and interpretation of that motif is critical to illuminating its design principles. However, considering consumption involves issues beyond simply marketability. Pierre Bourdieu speaks of consumption as "a stage in a process of communication, that is an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a code."[4] This code is the basis for Venturi's argument and for a framework within which architects can participate in themed architecture.

Although the code of contemporary themed architecture is embedded in issues surrounding modern consumerism, it is also one grounded in historical design principles in order to achieve the desired marketability. The first step in deciphering the code of themed architecture is the familiar academic one of historical research and critical interpretation.

GARDENS

Gardens are places of representation, providing virtual experiences first to the nobility, then to the middle class and the dead, and finally to all urban dwellers. The garden has always been conceived as a pleasure ground, a place for leisure and amusement. The ways in which people used gardens and their designs depended largely on the taste cultures which they served. Common to all was escape — being transported to exotic places which were yet familiar through travelogues and popular images of foreign lands. Viewing art objects which were otherwise inaccessible and thereby participating in a cultural activity, as well as parading for other strollers participating in the same cultural activity, was essential to the garden. The gardens provided a miniaturized, inexpensive and safe re-creation of common scenes, dreams and fantasies and provided a venue for the redefinition of self, usually in terms of taste culture. The themes of escapism, exoticism, and voyeurism combined with nostalgia were explicit in garden design and theory.

The geometric garden, most associated with French garden design, was a party setting, a place for the nobility to parade for each other. What was being seen and admired were the aspects of the nobles who circulated around the place in the context of artifacts and a demonstration of man's taming of nature. This kind of garden differs conceptually and physically from other garden types, but contains important social connotations for modern themed projects. The providing of places to view and be viewed in the context of constructed backdrops and artifacts is critical in themed design.[5]

The first design of picturesque nature was based on paintings, most notably by Claude-Lorrain and Salvatora Rosa. Picturesque gardens, however, departed dramatically from the pictorial and, "Although the picturesque has tended to be flattened into a picture plane, it was, rather, one of the first vehicles for the deliberate exploration of spaciality."[6] The spaces of the picturesque garden were of a wild, romantic nature recalling familiar pictorial references and transforming them into an experiential fantasy. Gardens like the Desert du Retz, Stowe and many others included exotic structures such as Chinese houses and bridges, Roman and Egyptian ruins as well as quaint English country cottages and hermitages. These elements would be glimpsed from a distance and then arrived at through a montage of incoherent "scenes." The narrative was collapsed and nonsensical, appealing to a sense of individual adventure and the surreal. One sequence in the Desert du Retz, for example, was through the grotto, past the tartar tent on an island and the

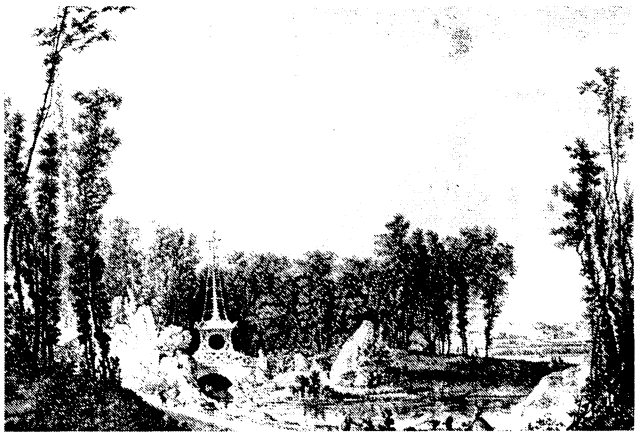

Fig. 1. A view of the Chinese Bridge, Bagatelle, engraved by Elise Saugrain after Louis-Gabriel Moreau l'Aine, Musee des Arts Decoratifs, Paris.

Chinese house, over a rustic bridge, and finally glimpsing and arriving at M. de Monville's home which was contained in a monumental broken Doric column. The narrative of the promenade, distinct exotic zones and the *mise-en-scene* likened to film montage, are clearly present in the picturesque garden.

Considered politically, the surgence of ruins, varied architectural and landscape references, as well as the rustic nature of the picturesque garden, marked a turn by the nobility to the gothic style due in part to a nostalgia for the authority inherent in feudal power structures. The English aristocracy wished to ease the discomfort it felt with the emergence of a powerful and moneyed middle class which was usurping formerly reserved aristocratic pastimes. These political motives, nostalgic desire, and a continued interest in the exotic and seductive, precipitated a style which paralleled, in its motives and product, contemporary theme park and leisure design.

Garden design is discussed at length in Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* as Sidley Park in England is being redesigned to conform to the picturesque style by Mr. Noakes, the landscape architect. His client, Lady Croom, describes the redesign thus:

> Lady Croom: Where there is the familiar pastoral refinement of an Englishman's garden, here is an eruption of gloomy forest and towering crag, of ruins where there was never a house, of water dashing against rocks where there was neither spring nor a stone I could not throw the length of a cricket pitch. My hyacinth dell is become a haunt for hobgoblins, my Chinese bridge, which I am assured is superior to the one at Kew[7], and for all I know at Peking, is usurped by a fallen obelisk overgrown with briars...Pray, what is this rustic hovel that presumes to superimpose itself on my gazebo?
>
> Mr. Noakes: That is the hermitage, Madam.[8]

In this interchange concerning a garden redesign in 1809,

Fig. 2. View at Huntington Gardens, Pasadena, photo by the author.

many of the principles which drive themed design are expressed. There is reference to the re-creation of a variation of the known in the exploitation of the inauthentic coupled with a re-creation of the exotic culminating in virtual travel and displacement. Fashion and historicism are demonstrated through a typological investigation of landscape and architecture through the medium of the garden *folie*, and a mannerist interpretation of architectural styles and themes.

The "Natural" garden, the former style of Sidley Park, is also described concisely by Lady Croom in the following passage:

> Lady Croom: But Sidley Park is already a picture[9] and a most amiable picture too. The slopes are green and gentle. The trees are companionably grouped at intervals that show them to advantage. The rill is a serpentine ribbon unwound from the lake peaceably contained by meadows on which the right amount of sheep are tastefully arranged - in short, it is nature as God intended, and I can say with the painter, '*Et in Arcadia ego!*' 'Here I am in Arcadia,...'[10]

The "natural style" re-created enhanced "natural" vistas which related to the user as an abstract viewer rather than as an explorer and participant. "Capability" Brown, the best known designer in this style, constructed landscapes which gave the illusion of expansive space and uninterrupted horizons. Ponds appear as lakes and meadows as expansive fields when viewed from certain aspects through plays on scale and perception. This garden depended on illusions from afar for its impact and success. It was not exotic, but rather heightened the already familiar character of the English countryside by making an inauthentic reality. The dependence on the viewer and the fulfillment of a desire to transform the everyday into the monumental marked the "natural" style in garden design.[11]

THE CRYSTAL PALACE

The Crystal Palace designed by Joseph Paxton was built in Hyde park, London in 1851 to house the first International Great Exhibition. The building demonstrated the potential of building materials and the exhibitions displayed the future of industry. It was the first thematically organized exposition, combining industrialization and mass production with fantasy and virtual environments.[12] The underlying theme of mass production related directly to the middle and emerging manufacturing worker classes. The Crystal Palace's location in an urban park, combined with its formal reference to a greenhouse, placed it firmly in the realm of the populace as well as in the context of the garden.

The Crystal Palace held the world within its glass and iron structure and the experience within the Crystal Palace encompassed aspects of garden design. The voyeurism essential to the geometric garden design was central to the Palace in that "...the Palace created a space of public spectacle where visitors themselves were on display, as consumable as the products they came to see if not actually procure."[13] The design and organization incorporated picturesque principles of simulated environments and discontinuous sequences in the new context of industrialization and global access. The context of the garden also physically remained as a backdrop for the displays as seen through the exposed glass walls of the palace.

Each nation developed an area which displayed products native to that country's manufacturing and was arranged in a way which would transport the visitor/shopper to that place. The exhibited nations' method was to simulate an environment which evoked an alien place. The Indian exhibit, for example, had a stuffed elephant amid exotic fabrics, curtains and clothing. When in this area, the visitor was transported to India underscored while views of other areas and the park were veiled.

These unfamiliar and seductive elements were experienced in a sequence against the backdrop of Hyde Park, an

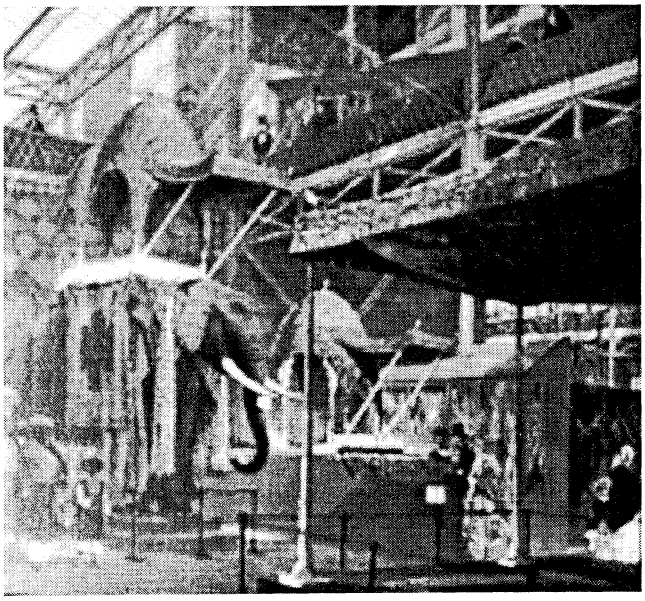

Fig. 3. View of the India exhibit at the International Great Exhibition of 1851, Hyde Park, London, rendering by Owen Jones.

utterly familiar and iconic symbol of England. The blurring of interior and exterior through the type of building construction was emphasized through the medium of a garden. The collapse of the simultaneous stimuli and experiences brought together themes familiar from garden design. The Crystal Palace is an important precedent to the examination of modes of expressing time, place and patriotism in themed projects of the latter twentieth century. The Crystal Palace was a theme park, a museum, and a shopping mall.

CONTEMPORARY THEMED ARCHITECTURE

Univeral City Walk, Los Angeles, CA

Universal City Walk in Los Angeles creates a privatized urban pleasure ground and reinvents the conventions of the shopping mall through the use of monumental iconography and the expansion of the two-dimensional storefront into an active zone between exterior street and interior program. The spatial experience of the outdoor shopping street is a promenade, a sequence of incongruent architectural facades, signage and sculptural elements which simulate a heightened version of a pedestrian urban shopping district.

The private pleasure ground was the intent of garden design before the middle of the nineteenth century and the urban pleasure ground is a project which has been constant in modern times. The Jerde Partnership confronted the bounded requirements of contemporary commercialism at City Walk. The two-dimensional storefront, analogous to the source painting in the picturesque and the monumental *vitrines* at the Crystal Palace, was widened to become a three dimensional storefront sequence. This hyper commercial three-dimensionality, scale and language use iconic imagery from familiar media such as television, sports, and computer technology. The Englishman of the Enlightenment looked to Horace Walpole as City Walk looks to Hank Aaron.

The shifts in scale and perception recall the landscape tricks of "Capability" Brown, but reinterpreted in an urban language. City Walk exposes and comments upon the inauthentic urbanism based on desired urban fictions, combined with the collapse of conventional narratives into a pseudo-urban jumble. In Los Angeles, a city of flat sprawl and the automobile, City Walk is a private wish granted for a Main Street, USA.

Jerde countered the prescriptions of Victor Gruen and subsequently developers' suburban shopping malls by combining them with a series of simulated "events" imitating and reinventing a shopping street in the context of a movie studio theme park and an exurban city. The familiar, yet heightened experience for the consumer results in a transformation of the banal into the monumental.

The project is rooted in fundamental principles including the reinterpretation of traditional architectural, urban (and suburban) typologies, the garden *folies*, and sentimental streetscapes. The transposition of dreams and fantasies onto reinterpretations of idealized traditional urban scenes in the project clearly recall garden theory.

Fig. 4. The Jerde Partnership, Universal City Walk, Los Angeles, California.

Disneyland, Anaheim, CA

Disneyland is organized as a sequence of several "lands," each evoking a different, historical or fictional reference. While Main Street, USA re-creates a scaled shopping street composed of replicas of buildings in small towns in America, Fantasy Land bases its reconstructions, including the central Sleeping Beauty's Castle on Grimm Fairy Tales.[14] Disneyland is a place of representation, re-creating fantasies and dreams on a promenade through a series of exotic zones. Each zone simulates a complete environment, including landscape, buildings, pathways, materials, mu-

Fig. 5. View of Toon Town, Disneyland, Anaheim, CA, photo by the author.

sic, etc. which correspond to the particular theme of the land.

The narrative of transition from land to land is an incoherent one, undoing any sense of conventional historical or geographical progression. The design of Disneyland promotes the complete immersion in one fiefdom of the Magic Kingdom before entering the next. It is surprising when one glimpses Fantasy Land from Critter Country, for example, because the currently constructed narrative of place is temporarily broken. The sequence recalls movement through the picturesque garden transporting the stroller from Egypt to China abruptly when rounding a bend in the path as in the Desert du Retz. Michael Sorkin observed that "Disneyland...is the place where the ephemeral reality of the cinema is concretized into the stuff of the city."[15] The promenade at Disneyland alludes convincingly to filmic montage because of its abrupt discontinuities and edits.

The voyeurism inherent to the French garden and the abstract viewer of the natural garden are both iterated at Disneyland. The parade of visitors is one of the main attractions at the park signaled by its popularity with teenagers and facilitated by long lines waiting for rides. The concept of the abstracted, orchestrated view is demonstrated through the locations of "picture spots," designating points from which desirable, contrived vistas and backdrops can be captured on (Kodak) film. The construction of Disneyland's myths as well as the orchestration of its spatial sequences have a clear historical precedent in garden design and theory of previous centuries.

THEMES OF THE GARDEN

Garden design and theory give important insight into contemporary themed design. Principles and design tools employed in gardens are useful analytical tools when considering themed projects. Encouraging the subjectification of people in exotic and unfamiliar surroundings as well as reinterpreting familiar objects and locations is at the core of historical design method and is relevant to the analysis of contemporary themed projects. The abandonment of the picture plane for three-dimensional spatiality gains historical import when considered in the context of the formulation of the picturesque. In addition, the political motives and social reorganization concurrent with shifts in garden theory are pertinent when examining recent themed urban projects. The more intangible motives in garden design such as fulfillment of desires and escape through simulations of exotic places and things, also serve as important tools in the design and analysis of themed proposals. Viewing people and objects, as well as being viewed in a scripted manner are critical spatial organizing concepts for themed design. Most of the principles cited are inspired by recognizable source material, lending a familiar and often nostalgic recognizability and attraction to the projects. Fiction, encyclopedias and travelogues were references in the eighteenth century and, added to those, are television, cinema and computer imagery in this century. Through the analysis of motives and motifs in garden design and theory as well as its transition into the more conventional architectural realm (the Crystal Palace), we have gained access and understanding of contemporary themed projects which include City Walk and Disneyland.

NOTES

[1] Venturi, Scott-Brown, Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, MIT Press, 1985, p.154.

[2] Witold Rybczynski, "The Little Apple," *The New Yorker*, Jan 6, 1997, p. 23.

[3] Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, Basic Books, New York, 1974, p. vii.

[4] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1984, p. 2.

[5] It should also be noted that the artifacts around which people paraded and which they admired were often considered to be "museum-quality" pieces, hence they provided a themed environment for the viewing of objects and people. This is a precursor to the emerging museum typology which simulates places, times and events as seen in projects including the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC by Pei, Cobb and Freed and the planned Seattle "Experience Music Project" by Frank O. Gehry and Associates.

[6] Sylvia Lavin, "Sacrifice and the Garden: Wattelet's *Essai sur les jardins* and the Space of the Picturesque," *Assemblage 28*, MIT Press, 1996, p. 29.

[7] Lady Croom is referring to the Kew Garden "chinoiserie." The Kew structures and most chinoiserie in England in the late 18th century were designed based on observations which were documented and subsequently published by Sir William Chambers. Chambers visited China three times and published the first edition of "The Art of Designing Gardens According to the Customs of The Chinese" in 1757.

[8] Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*, Faber and Faber, Ltd., London, 1993, p. 12.

[9] Lady Croom is referring to the term "picturesque."

[10] Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*, Faber and Faber, Ltd., London, 1993, p. 12.

[11] The American Urban Park and City Beautiful movements adopted many of the precepts of English and French garden design of the 18th and 19th centuries. A principle distinguishing factor was that these themed projects were conceived for the urban masses and began with democratic precepts.

[12] The 1853 fair in New York had the first explicitly stated theme which was "the history of the earth," officially adapting for a commercial context the narrative quality which was crucial to the gardens of the enlightenment.

[13] Andrea Kahn, "The Invisible Mask," *Drawing/Building/Text*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1991, p. 89-90.

[14] The themes of the lands at Disneyland are as follows: Main Street, USA — small town Americana, Fantasy land — Grimm Fairy tales, Frontier Land — the "old west" (historical and fictional), Critter Country — land where animals are anthropomorphized, Tomorrow Land — the future (technological past), Toon Town — Cartoon land modeled on the familiar small town similar to Main Street, USA.

[15] Michael Sorkin, "See You in Disneyland," *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, The Noonday Press, New York, 1992, p. 227.