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## Disney's Celebration, the Promise of New Urbanism, and the Portents of Homogeneity

by Hugh E. Bartling

Perhaps the most important demographic and social transformation that has occurred in the United States in the past fifty years has been mass suburbanization. As some of the more astute commentators on suburban development have argued, these shifts in population have been accompanied by political and social changes, utterly reconfiguring the nature of civic interaction in the country. Government subsidized loans for white middle-class home buyers transformed the suburban landscape and provided the impetus for the construction of a very different lived environment than had heretofore existed.<sup>1</sup> The post-World War II suburb was arranged around the single-family home, transportation by private automobile, a paradigm of mixed zoning that separated residential, occupational, and consumptive spaces, and a general ethos of expansion that has been translated into the derisive moniker of suburban "sprawl."

Many students of urban development have commented on the social and political consequences stemming from these changes to the built environment. As early as 1956, Paul Goodman critiqued the social vacuity that accompanied the ascendancy of suburbia. The predilection of modern planning practitioners to think of sub-

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1. Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, 1985).

urban development primarily from a technical standpoint debased the importance of vibrant public spaces for facilitating engaged social interaction. The new communities privileged a narrow notion of function that failed to comprehend the lived habitat as a space where a variety of complex human interactions are performed: for example, work, leisure, commerce. For Goodman, this results in a "creeping defeatism and surrender by default to the organized system of the state and semimonopolies" that contribute to social malaise.<sup>2</sup>

A similar sentiment was developed by one of the twentieth century's most prolific critics of urban development, Lewis Mumford. In his tome, *The City in History*, Mumford described contemporary suburbia as arising out of the homogenizing tendencies of a mechanistic apparatus of mass production. An unabashed proponent of the vitality that emerges in a heterogeneous urban environment, Mumford feared the consequences of a lived environment structured on the monotonous model of the machine. Characterizing the post-World War II population flight from the industrial cities to the new suburbs as an exercise in "escape," Mumford contended that "the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible."<sup>3</sup>

It is this uniformity of the suburban social, architectural, and political landscape that the innovative New Urbanism planning paradigm has sought to confront. Not since Daniel Burnham's City Beautiful movement has the design profession sought, in such explicit terms, to effect civic engagement through the construction of "humane" structures and cities. With its initial incarnation in the United States in the early 1980s, manifest at the new town of Seaside, Florida, the New Urbanism movement gained considerable currency in design circles as a way to reclaim the importance of vibrant public spaces in urban and suburban areas.<sup>4</sup>

The most prominent of New Urbanist developments to date is Celebration, Florida, where building civic engagement and its

2. Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd* (New York, 1956), 228.

3. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York, 1961), 486.

4. Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, "The Second Coming of the American Small Town," *The Wilson Quarterly* 16 (1992): 19-48; Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation* (New York, 2000); Michael Leccese and Kathleen McCormick, eds., *Charter of the New Urbanism* (New York, 1999).

ever-elusive relative, "community," dominated the planning paradigm. Celebration has garnered a considerable amount of publicity since its incarnation in 1994 because of its size and the unique prominence of its developer, the Disney Company.<sup>5</sup> As a global media behemoth that purveys in the realm of cultural commodities, Disney has long been the subject of critical academic studies for the way it has portrayed history and identity in its movies, television shows, and theme parks.<sup>6</sup> Often thought of as the standard-bearer for an Americanized middlebrow class, any attempt by Disney to construct a suburban town (the apotheosis of the middlebrow landscape) was undoubtedly going to be closely scrutinized.<sup>7</sup> Two recent books written by participant-observers in Celebration have presented insightful and indispensable observations about life in the town and its residents' quest for civic engagement.<sup>8</sup>

This article seeks to further contribute to understanding Celebration by presenting findings garnered from a survey of the town's residents conducted in the summer of 1999. The survey was designed to anonymously gauge resident opinion on corporate governance, community satisfaction, civic engagement, and controversial issues affecting the town. While it is difficult to authoritatively claim relations of causality, a central goal of the survey was to ascertain the importance of the physical environment in facilitating meaningful community interaction. To this end, the survey results contribute to an understanding of New Urbanist claims that changes in the way urban spaces are designed will have a positive impact on community building. In the case of Celebration, however, New Urbanist claims about community-building, while seemingly appealing on the surface, are strongly based on a sense of exclusion and social withdrawal that many social and political theorists have claimed contribute to a weakening of democratic structures.<sup>9</sup>

5. Russ Rymer, "Back to The Future: Disney Reinvents the Company Town," *Harpers* 293 (1996): 65-78.

6. Stephen Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (Boulder, Colo., 1992); Mike Wallace, "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World," *Radical History Review* 32 (1985): 33-57.

7. Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London, Eng., 1989).

8. Andrew Ross, *The Celebration Chronicles* (New York, 1999); Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins, *Celebration USA: Living in Disney's Brave New Town* (New York, 1999).

9. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York, 1978); Robert Reich, *Work of Nations* (New York, 1991).

The tradition of looking towards design and the manipulation of the built environment to facilitate explicit forms of social and political interaction is long and distinctive. From the paternalistic attempt on the part of George Pullman in the 1880s to design a town to elicit worker obedience, sobriety, and salubriousness to the Regional Planning Association of America's pre-Depression construction of a "Garden City for America," there has been no paucity of efforts to employ spatial means to encourage social ends. Thus, to a certain extent the New Urbanist movement represents a current variant of a visionary search for translating normative notions about the arrangement of space into a positive environment in which to live.

As its name suggests, the New Urbanism is of a genus peculiar to the contemporary age whereby uncertainty about the future is mollified through a selected appeal to the past. For New Urbanists, the suburban environment emerging in the United States after World War II was disastrous, if the measure of success is the freedom to "live well." Emerging first as a negative critique, proponents of the New Urbanism have looked to preexisting urban forms for their inspiration and guidance in developing new design projects.<sup>10</sup>

Like any "utopian" vision, the New Urbanism embodies a critique of dominant urban and suburban forms. It is in this critique that the design imperative ultimately finds its appeal. A review of the major tenets of New Urbanism as articulated by the charter of its primary professional organization, the Congress for the New Urbanism, and in the writings of its most vocal practitioners demonstrate the saliency of its vision and provide the foundation for assessing Celebration's success as a "community."

Miami architects and town planners Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk have been among the most visible theorists and proponents of the New Urbanism. Referring to the growth-at-all-costs mentality that has characterized post-World War II suburban development as "cancerous...and destr[uctive] of our civic life," Duany and Plater-Zyberk described the suburb as "less a community than agglomeration of houses, shops, and offices connected to one another by cars, not by the fabric of human life."<sup>11</sup>

10. Duany and Plater-Zyberk, "The Second Coming of the American Small Town," 19-48.

11. *Ibid.*, 20-21.

This situation emerged not because of any socio-economic factors but because of poor planning and a lack of foresight on the part of governmental officials at various levels. Duany and Plater-Zyberk offered a different way of looking at land, buildings, and development, presenting a visionary response for eventual emulation. Thus, we are asked to look at the traditional small town of pre-World War II America as a model for re-appropriating habitable communities.

Although re-appropriation of a singular historical image for emulation is problematic in a society as diverse as the United States, given its inevitable distortions, exclusions, and reworkings of the past, the main thrust of the New Urbanist paradigm is to encourage high-density, pedestrian-friendly, environmentally-specific design.<sup>12</sup> In one sense it is fair to say that New Urbanists see Old Suburbia, in the spirit of Mumford, as a machine.<sup>13</sup> Restrictive zoning separates the functions of daily life into discrete units designed for maximum efficiency. Office parks replete with solid buildings and adorned with mirrored glass serve as repositories for the functionaries of the information economy. Industrial parks have row after row of single story warehouses with generous loading docks and wide streets to accommodate delivery truck traffic. Malls allow the concentration of shopping. And their "strip" cousins provide discounts and the mass presentation of vast numbers of commodities to the consuming public. Living districts employ cul-de-sacs to provide privacy and a safe place for children to play.

Each function is relegated to its separate sphere where specialized tasks can be honed, re-evaluated, and streamlined. Streets, highways, and connector roads serve as the linking mechanisms of the machine, operating in a modified assembly-line fashion by transporting suburban inhabitants on multiple journeys of identity transition, from family provider to employee to shopper. Like any good machine developed in a society that places a premium on efficiency, the various pods of human experience have been studied and their parts standardized to insure their alacrity functioning. Efficiency's comrade, interchangeability, insures the sustenance of this process and contributes to a "geography of

12. Nina Veregge, "Traditional Environments and the New Urbanism: A Regional and Historical Critique," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 8 (1997): 49-62.

13. Lewis Mumford, *Art and Technics* (New York, 1952).

nowhere" where the process of landscape production is intent on destroying diverse, unique parts that do not fit the machine.<sup>14</sup>

New Urbanists try to salvage these parts and employ them in what they see as a process of humanization rather than mechanization. This archaeological project unveils forms from the past as potential saviors of the present. The homogeneity that accompanies a dominant suburban development characterized by corporate retail stores, "cinder-block architecture," and expansive shopping malls finds its antithesis in a mode of commerce and social interaction easily observable in older landscapes where the scale of development was more intensive. Thus, in their appeal to the "second coming of the American small town," Duany and Plater-Zyberk presented the small town as an example for inspiration in planning rather than a blueprint for adoption.

While the charter of the Congress for the New Urbanism is not so presumptuous as to explicitly insist on a type of design determinism, it nonetheless offers suggestions as to how planners and architects can construct a lived environment that abandons the auto-centric and socially atomizing tendencies of dominant suburban planning. These suggestions are grouped around three major principles: communities must exhibit diversity in land use; they must be scaled for pedestrians; and they must have a "well-defined public realm supported by an architecture reflecting on the ecology and culture of the region."<sup>15</sup>

Guided by these principles, the charter essentially calls for a reconfiguration of the suburban zoning patterns developed over the past fifty years. Instead of having restrictive zoning whereby the major functions of everyday life (habitation, commerce, and employment) are dispersed, making travel by private automobile virtually a necessity, the charter recommends that "concentrations of civic, institutional and commercial activity should be embedded into neighborhoods and districts not isolated in remote, single-use complexes." Instead of making the private automobile the primary method of moving throughout suburbia, the charter calls for "a framework of transportation alternatives . . . [including] transit, pedestrian, and bicycle systems."<sup>16</sup>

14. James Howard Knustler, *The Geography of Nowhere* (New York, 1994).

15. Dhuru Thadani and Peter Hetzel, "The Congress for the New Urbanism," *Indian Architect and Builder* 10 (1996): 42.

16. *Ibid.*, 48.



The design of Celebration encourages multiple forms of transportation. Bicycles, electronic vehicles, and automobiles all are accommodated, without any one mode dominating. *Photograph by Hugh G. Bartling.*

Through a physical reconstruction of the suburban landscape along these lines, the hope of New Urbanism is that human-scale building (as opposed to machine-scale) will provide spatial opportunities for random social interaction, engender empathy amongst



inhabitants of a particular locale, and facilitate the development of a sense of "community" whose concomitant is civic engagement. These design changes have the effect of "the making of space that draws people out from their private realms to stroll and loiter with their neighbors," making the neighborhood more "intimate" rather than anonymous.<sup>17</sup>

While the design imperatives of New Urbanist development have been, when built and inhabited, quite novel and distinct from much of post-World War II suburbia, claims that the changes in design translate into positive community engagement are a bit more difficult to establish. Because the number of New Urbanist developments is relatively small and—until the construction of Celebration by the prominent Disney Company—relatively obscure, studies of the design/community nexus have not offered authoritative pronouncements about New Urbanism in practice.

Many interesting studies have been done on the cultural meanings and ideological underpinnings of the New Urbanism. Geographer Karen Falconer Al-Hindi and Caedmon Staddon, for example, argued that New Urbanism "functions as an expression of new and complex articulations between currently hegemonic class fractions and a rather chiliastic habitus of urban social practices."<sup>18</sup> For these authors, the New Urbanist town of Seaside lost any pretense to "authenticity" because of its prefabricated nature and its genesis as a completely planned, corporate space. While the New Urbanist credo holds that dominant suburban patterns restrict meaningful social interaction, the prefabrication inherent in a town like Seaside fails to provide the antidote. Structural dictates coupled with class-exclusive developments inhibit spontaneous, unplanned interaction. Thus the New Urbanism, rather than facilitating vibrant public spaces, "seek[s] to foreclose or displace . . . heterotopic possibilities."<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, geographer K. Till analyzed the New Urbanist development of Rancho Santa Margarita in Orange County, California. In an effort to demonstrate the town's connection with an

17. Duany and Plater-Zyberk, "The Second Coming of the American Small Town," 39.

18. Karen Falconer Al-Hindi and Caedmon Staddon, "The Hidden Histories and Geographies of Neotraditional Town Planning: the Case of Seaside, Florida," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 15 (1997): 350.

19. Falconer and Staddon, "The Hidden Histories and Geographies," 369.

“authentic Old West” past, Till described how the developers claimed they were continuing a design heritage dating back to the days of post-Spanish European settlement. Employing the codes and history of a privileged, white, capitalist class insured the community’s exclusiveness in an increasingly heterogeneous Southern California. In this example Rancho Santa Margarita’s developers produced a New Urbanist appeal to an idealized past. Building upon the pioneer story of one of the developer’s distant relatives, Rancho Santa Maria was presented as the reassertion of nineteenth-century homesteader Richard O’Neil’s vision of the rugged individualist “life on the frontier” of the Old West. The history presented was one of relative simplicity where the unattractive realities of ethnic conflict and environmental degradation were shrouded under an appeal to reclaim the “traditional” landscape of Southern California. That “tradition” is associated with a “pioneer” like O’Neil, Till argued, must be understood in the context of the contemporary political contexts of Orange County. In a climate of English Only initiatives and minority discontent in nearby inner city Los Angeles, Till claimed that the New Urbanist penchant for reversion implicates the design imperative in a politics of exclusion.<sup>20</sup>

Recently, attempts to understand how changes in physical space affect the potential for community have emerged in theoretical and interpretive discussions of the New Urbanism’s efforts at social design. Ivonne Audirac and Anne H. Shermeyen questioned the effectiveness of privileging pedestrian mobility and the propinquity of workplace, home, and commercial space in affecting a sense of community. Looking at conditions in Seaside they found that, in a New Urbanist community replete with pedestrian pathways between houses, small lot sizes, and open access to public spaces, residents actively reconfigured spaces in the town in attempts to decrease perceived private invasiveness that accompanies public-based architecture. In yards that were contiguous to pedestrian paths, for example, residents planted dense shrubbery to restrict views of their property. Similarly, like many planned developments, Seaside erected flocks of “private road” signs, hired private security forces to patrol the town, and residents had been

20. K. Till, “Neotraditional Towns and Urban Villages: The Cultural Production of a Geography of ‘Otherness,’” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 11 (1993): 709-732.

informally contemplating the erection of entry-gates.<sup>21</sup> While Seaside may indeed be a place where New Urbanist enthusiast Philip Langdon contends that “the streets are the scene of leisurely promenades,” occupied by the vacationing dandy who strolls past quaint restaurants and gourmet grocery stores that are the required accoutrements for the New Urbanist class, the spatial refigurement revealed a tint of noir beneath the gilding.<sup>22</sup>

The nature of Seaside as a tourist destination and a town composed primarily of vacation homes may not make it the best example from which to tender an evaluation of New Urbanism. There have been calls for more empirical work on New Urbanism. In a recent article, Emily Talen brought the eye of an admiring skeptic to the claims of New Urbanism. Talen argued that the major claim of New Urbanism—that the physical design of space, if done in a particular way, will promote a sense of community—has been well scrutinized by a number of scholars who have been unable to authoritatively validate it. Intervening variables such as the degree of ethnic, racial, and class homogeneity and the importance of psychological disposition towards attaining “community” have contributed to social cohesion in ways that are not dependent upon a certain type of design. Talen also took particular issue with the fuzzy and insouciant ways in which the term “community” is employed by planners without providing a specific definition, making it difficult to assess whether or not the New Urbanist goals are met.<sup>23</sup>

In response to Talen’s call for social science research on New Urbanist communities and in an effort to contribute to the larger body of work on space, design, and community life, the data gathered for this study was compiled through a survey and in-depth interviews with Celebration residents.<sup>24</sup> Residents were asked questions regarding their decision to move to Celebration, their

21. Ivonne Audriac and Anne H. Shermeyen, “An Evaluation of Neotraditional Design’s Social Prescription: Postmodern Placebo or Remedy for Suburban Malaise?” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 13 (1994): 161-173.

22. Philip Langdon, *A Better Place to Live* (Amherst, Mass., 1994), 110.

23. Emily Talen, “Sense of Community and Neighbourhood Form: An Assessment of the Social Doctrine of New Urbanism,” *Urban Studies* 36 (1999): 1361-1379.

24. The survey was mailed to every residential address in Celebration as of May 1999 (725 addresses). A total of 264 surveys were returned, eliciting a 36 percent response rate.

satisfaction with corporate governance, their desire to have more input in making decisions affecting the town, their political ideologies and party affiliations, and general demographic characteristics. Finally, the respondents were asked open-ended questions regarding whether Celebration met their expectations as a community. This combination of quantifiable data and qualitative responses (garnered both through the open-ended questions on the survey and through the prior interviews) provides a rich resource from which to analyze the relationship between community, urban design, and corporate governance in Celebration.

Celebration can best be understood as a commodity rather than a city. Redolent of trends in contemporary political economy whereby capitalist enterprises realize profit through the manipulation of symbols to encourage the consumption of their products, Disney's translation of the dictates of New Urbanism into practice seems to be guided more by marketing than enlightened planning. In Celebration as a marketed commodity, signs and codes manipulated by Disney often refer to abstract concepts not very often "themed."<sup>25</sup> Disney World, for instance, employs meaningful and prevalent signs from popular culture to connote feelings of fantasy, escape, and adventure. Frontierland employs architecture and rides simulating an idealized version of the Wild West as a theme of adventure. Similarly, Space Mountain connotes the excitement of exploring the last frontier of space travel. In these cases, the signifiers of rocket ships and swinging door saloons are grounded in real and popularly imagined instances of the Wild West or space exploration.<sup>26</sup> In the case of Celebration, much of what is presented as a theme (and a desirable commodity) is the association with certain abstract conditions. Celebration's themed elements are less concrete than the Wild West, safaris, or space. Because of the inherently subjective nature of Disney's selling points of "community," "place," and "education," residents' material interpretation of these marketing tools have, in the seven short years the town has been inhabited, predicated the spaces of controversy and contestation regarding corporate policies.

Perhaps the most prevalent word one hears when talking with residents and Celebration Company employees and reading journalistic accounts of the town and Celebration Company promo-

25. Mark Gottdiener, *The Theming of America* (Boulder, 1997).

26. Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*.

tional literature is "community."<sup>27</sup> "Community" as a feeling of civic engagement and inclusion is particularly difficult to define, let alone symbolize. Through constant reiteration by Disney it has become an oft-used term by residents themselves to describe the town.<sup>28</sup> Explicitly presented as a major building block of the town, "community" in Disney's promotional literature seems more to stand for the celebrity team of town planners, architects, and corporate partners involved in Celebration's design. Under the heading, "The building of a community," the corporation elaborated that

Celebration is a collaborative effort of leading architects and community planners with a vision of building an American town. They include architects and town planners Robert A. M. Stern and Jaquelin Robertson; renowned golf course architects Robert Trent Jones Sr. and Robert Trent Jones Jr.; as well as leaders in education, health, and technology from Harvard Graduate School of Education, Johnson and Johnson, GE, AT&T, and other institutions.<sup>29</sup>

Celebration residents were asked to place their faith in the expertise of master architect Stern, well-known golf course designers, and multinational corporations like General Electric to define and implement "community." While the term may be vacuous when appearing on Disney's brochures and billboards, "community," however one wants to define it, certainly had a strong appeal for many people choosing to live in Celebration. When residents named the top two motivating factors that contributed to their decision to move to Celebration, "Community" was selected by far more than any other (see Table 1). Curiously, the next two highest responses were Disney's involvement and the innovative and much-hyped neighborhood school. Responses focusing on the built environment such as "Town Design," "Architecture," and "Quality of homes" did not elicit as many adherents, making it

27. The Celebration Company is Disney's wholly owned subsidiary that manages the town.

28. Susan G. Strother, *Rockwell Versus Orwell: The Quest for Community and Disney's Celebration Development* (Winter Park, Fla., 1997).

29. Disney, *Celebration: An American Town* (Celebration, Fla., n.d.), 2.

seem that New Urbanists' design imperative was less important in facilitating community than a psychological disposition.

Table 1. Motivations for Moving to Celebration

Stated Reason	Number of Responses
Community	130
Disney	74
School	69
Town Design	53
Architecture	31
Proximity to Work	23
Location	19
Wellness	13
Technology	4
Golf Course	2
Quality of Homes	1

Whether respondents were simply regurgitating Disney's ubiquitous marketing strategy is difficult to ascertain. However, "Community" is just one of several points company officials and literature emphasized. Others, such as "Place," emphasized the design component of the town—parks, golf course, architecture—yet, in this survey, choices indicative of these design features were not picked by respondents with as high a frequency as other motivating factors.

If "community" is an important factor motivating people to move to Celebration, then, given its nature as a hierarchically operated space, it would not be unreasonable to assume that tensions may emerge between residents and the corporation. "Community" means different things to different people. A common and perhaps uncontroversial definition (and one with which many Celebration residents identified given the nature of comments garnered from the open-ended questions) includes a nod towards the organic development of a civic voice. For example, when controversy arose surrounding the school, there developed a vocal faction that expressed criticism towards Disney's subsidiary, the Celebration Company. The genesis of this faction can best be described as a classic *Gemeinschaft*—personal, autonomous, and

based on strong communal concerns.<sup>30</sup> Six months after the survey was sent there emerged a literal alternative civic voice for the community in the form of the *Celebration Independent* newspaper. The *Celebration Independent*, published and staffed by local residents, prides itself on a muckraking style seeking to dispel conventional corporate wisdom.

Still, the corporate control that accompanies Disney's definition of community does not seem to disturb most residents of Celebration who enthusiastically purchased a house and a "community." Continued growth and home sales in Celebration occur notwithstanding one of the earliest criticisms of the town as corporate planned and governed: it boasted a "town hall" without a municipal government and had a multitude of restrictions on house and property appearances including limits on political signs and garage sales.<sup>31</sup> Yet, these restrictions and their enforcement seem to be of little concern to residents. One Celebration resident who ran unsuccessfully for the Osceola County School Board claimed that the lack of civic government has been seriously overblown: "I can go walk right into the office of the [Celebration Company's] Vice President, he's my neighbor and will listen to my concerns."<sup>32</sup> This type of informal contact, he argued, provides much more "government" responsiveness than in a traditional democratically-elected city where the levels of bureaucracy militate against access. According to survey responses, this sentiment seems to be widespread with over 60 percent of the respondents expressing satisfaction with covenant enforcement. Only 16 percent expressed negative feelings towards the corporation's performance suggesting that the covenant and its enforcement are relatively uncontroversial.

Certainly the covenant that each homeowner signs when occupying property in Celebration is restrictive. But it is certainly not unique. The privatization of urban spaces and restrictions on land use through voluntary covenants has been commonly prevalent in "exclusive communities."<sup>33</sup> The relative parity of household incomes and social homogeneity in Celebration has led to a gen-

30. Frantz and Collins, *Celebration USA*; Ross, *The Celebration Chronicles*.

31. Rymer, "Back to the Future"; Jack Snyder, "The Rules are a Little Different at Celebration," *Orlando Sentinel*, 23 June 1996.

32. Interview, Jackson Mumey, 2 June 1998.

33. Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia* (New Haven, Conn., 1994).

eral acceptance, even embrace, of aesthetic restrictions. Many residents actively praise the general "look" of the town and are willing to accept the aesthetic wisdom of Disney, believing that the imposed architectural themes will help to increase property value in the town.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps the most contentious issue for many residents of Celebration is education. Dissatisfied outnumber satisfied, but the lack of a clear majority of responses either way is a testament to the controversial nature of the school. Disney presented education as one of the major foci of town development and used the uniqueness of the Celebration School as a major selling point for potential residents. The school, built and financed primarily by Disney, is actually a public school governed by the Osceola County School Board. Yet, it has clearly been a Disney enterprise. Originally designed to accommodate kindergarten through twelfth grade, the school was built in tandem with the Celebration Teaching Academy, a center intended to foster research into the latest pedagogical techniques. The Teaching Academy was pushed by Disney as a positive reason for moving to Celebration. It was designed to be a partnership between Disney, Stetson University, and the Osceola County School Board to train teachers, administrators, and educational researchers. As of June 1998, the academy had not materialized as a training base and was sitting empty and unused. By the end of the summer of 1998, Stetson University had in fact taken residence in the building. But the focus seemed to have changed from one envisioned as providing Osceola County teachers a dedicated laboratory for learning and implementing new pedagogical techniques to a facility for the exclusive use of Stetson as an extension campus for continuing training for teachers, reflected in its new name: the Stetson University Center.

The privatized Teaching Academy is just one example of Celebration's educational malaise. The main pedagogical disposition of the Celebration School has been the target of scorn for many disgruntled residents. The school emphasizes an "innovative" curriculum integrating traditional subjects of study with advanced technological gadgetry. Grade levels were supplanted by multi-aged "neighborhoods" with as many as one hundred students and four teachers operating as a team. Students were not

34. Anonymous open-ended survey responses overwhelmingly expressed this view.





Central to the New Urbanist planning paradigm is mixed use development. In downtown Celebration, a variety of shops occupy ground floor space while apartments are situated immediately above. *Photograph by Hugh G. Bartling.*

taught the technical skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic as separate functions, but rather the integration of skills were employed to address particular substantive problems. Traditional research papers were not assigned, replaced by hypertextual, multimedia projects employing what the school's Instructional Technology Specialist called "Jetson's technology."<sup>35</sup>

The "neighborhood" system of grouping students and teachers made the classroom somewhat chaotic and much less hierarchical than one would encounter in other schools. A "neighborhood" could have students ranging in age from five to eleven, resulting in older students helping to teach the younger ones. For much of the day, students worked in groups autonomously relying on teachers for periodic consultation. Frequent "kivas" (school officials define the term as an "American Indian word for 'discussion'") were instituted at each neighborhood's "hearth," or central gathering point, to make decisions

35. Interview, Scott Muri, 3 June 1998.

communally on matters of interest to the class. Teachers maintained that this method of sustained collaboration resulted in more self-disciplined and involved students. The integrative strategy of learning through encountering multidisciplinary projects, according to teachers, makes students more prepared for the multi-dimensionality they will encounter in the "real world."<sup>36</sup>

While some parents provided substantial, passionate support for different pedagogical techniques employed at the Celebration School, many were disappointed with its chaotic environment and technophilia. One resident described the school as a "zoo." His son had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder prior to enrolling at Celebration School, and the lack of structure allowed his penchant for distraction to flourish. Another parent had different concerns. His daughter had been placed in "gifted" programs prior to their moving to Celebration. In the "neighborhood" setting of Celebration School, however, she found herself unchallenged with substantive material that had to be presented to students of various ages and capabilities. Because of her advanced skills, she was often called upon to tutor the younger kids. While she was an invaluable asset to the learning processes of the children she helped, her father thought that she was not given the opportunity to advance her own knowledge base and critical thinking skills. Both parents eventually sent their children to schools outside Celebration; in the case of the former, he felt incumbent to send his son to a private boarding school as the greater Osceola County schools are not ranked amongst the state's highest in many subject areas.<sup>37</sup>

The insularity of Celebration and the school's propensity, even amidst the chaos, to reinforce that sense of community, makes the chances that children could possibly be transferred to a different school in the Osceola County school system a major concern for parents. The school initially accommodated all of Celebration's children plus a sizable number of students from areas in Osceola County outside of Celebration. But because the school is part of the county school system and ultimately not under the control of Disney, it is governed by an outside elected body which, hypothet-

36. Interview, Scott Muri, June 3, 1998 and other teachers who wished to remain anonymous, in May and June, 1998.

37. Interviews with Celebration residents, May and June 1998. Names are withheld at the request of the interviewees.

ically, could turn Celebration School into a magnet school where-by each child residing in Osceola County, regardless of whether or not he or she were a Celebration resident, would have to apply and be granted admission by the school board.

In the summer of 1998, a crowd of concerned parents and recent home-buyers expressed fear and, in some cases, petulance that Disney did not make this clear before they had decided to purchase a home in Celebration. Future residents wondered why Disney had not managed the school as well as the town.<sup>38</sup> Education is one of the top draws for potential homebuyers, and access to the school is certainly a valid concern for parents who purchased homes in Celebration particularly because the innovative structure of the school is highly touted and the portents for it being a public school potentially outside of corporate control were never breached by the company.

The Celebration School situation suggests a general disgruntlement with the "broken promises" of Disney. One resident reported that his family was

promised a world class school that practiced inclusion, best practices, and technology but have not received it. Was promised a K-12 neighborhood school that my child could walk to, now Celebration Company is changing it to K-7 and creating a mega H.S. for Celebration and Western Osceola County Residents.<sup>39</sup>

Parents committed to the school's pedagogical vision and ensuring the children of Celebration guaranteed access to the school have sought recourse in the public sphere. Jackson Mumej, a Celebration resident who has been identified as the school's "information officer" by *Disney Magazine* and as an owner of a test preparation service in his campaign literature, ran for an at-large seat in the November 1998 Osceola County school board election.<sup>40</sup> Running as an independent, he enjoyed the support of many residents. While the thrust of his campaign was based on the type of "issues" common to contemporary political discourse—"letting teachers teach, making administrators accountable, set higher stan-

38. Interviews with Celebration residents and new home buyers, 3 June 1998.

39. Anonymous open-ended survey response, August 1999.

40. Pippin Ross, "Celebrating Education," *Disney Magazine*, fall 1997, 82-88.

dards for the schools," he certainly had the active support of individuals closely associated with the school.<sup>41</sup> This has not been lost on citizens of greater Osceola County. Ed Thurman, resident of the working-class city of St. Cloud, considered the amount of money raised by Mumey excessive for a school board election, particularly since, running as an independent, he did not have to contend with a primary race.<sup>42</sup> Mumey's unabashed Celebration ties may have hurt him, however, as he lost the general election decisively.

While the perceived success of the school has been the major point of civic discontent or tension, it has not served to unravel the community. Residents who were early vocal critics of the school and the corporation were unceremoniously ostracized by other members of the community.<sup>43</sup> Some felt they were forced to even sell their homes and leave Celebration. Perhaps the most visible case was that of Michael and Luba Bilentschuk who were asked by Disney to not talk with the press after they moved out of the town.<sup>44</sup> When they refused, Disney still allowed them to leave, not enforcing the covenant they signed which would have penalized them for selling before July 1, 1999.

Two recent ethnographies written by transient residents in 1998 demonstrated how school detractors transformed from a silent to a vocal minority.<sup>45</sup> After a group of residents rented a meeting room at the Shoney's across U.S. 192 from Celebration to hold a "town meeting" (outside of the town) and discussed problems and strategies for changing policies at the school, various formal and informal groups emerged as voices for these school detractors. After it was disclosed in June of 1999 that a new high school was to be built, a group of parents utilizing the acronym C.A.R.E. circulated a petition asking for, among other things, the Celebration Company to include residents in formulating major decisions affecting the town.<sup>46</sup> The school controversy provides an example of a viable, functioning public sphere characterized by "free, active, self-governing citizens [acting] in the creation of

41. Jackson Mumey For School Board. "Jackson's Five," unpublished flyer.

42. *Osceola News Gazette*, 28 September 1998, 4.

43. Strother, *Rockwell Versus Orwell*.

44. Jerry Jackson, "Ex-Celebration Owners Asked to Keep Quiet," *Orlando Sentinel*, 14 February 1997.

45. Ross, *Celebration Chronicles*; Frantz and Collins, *Celebration USA*.

46. C.A.R.E., "Celebration Petition," 28 June 1999.

their common future."<sup>47</sup> Contrarily, it also represents the petty intra-class conflict of a suburban elite equating their individual aspirations with the greater public good.

However elusive the term remains and however much one can cynically relegate it to nothing more than a corporate marketing strategy to sell houses, "community" is something that Celebration residents continuously and consciously strive to realize. The myriad of civic groups that emerged in the nascent development attest to an underlying communal will to develop a public sphere. The Rotary Club, a garden club, a community theater group, a club for residents over sixty, the school's parent support group called the Dream Team, Boy Scout and Girl Scout chapters are all active participants in a vibrant civil society within a town developed and fundamentally governed by a corporation seeking to maximize profits. Like the mythic small-town America that Disney seeks to replicate in Celebration, civic groups and the public sphere have shaped a town where everyone really does seem to know everyone else.

New Urbanists contend that the manipulation of space in a particular way will inform the nature of social relations, but that paradigm becomes difficult to accept when exploring Celebration. Community and civic engagement have coalesced around emotive issues rather than physical ones, suggesting that the relationship between space and society should be viewed from an integrative standpoint rather than an oppositional one. This became quite clear in a survey of Celebration's residents. There seemed to be a keen awareness that community building is a difficult, personalized process. One response attributed a sense of community identity to "the God fearing people here that make the difference." Others were sober in their assessments of what "community" can do and whether the expectations that drew residents to Celebration were somewhat utopian. Some argued for the "departure of persons who moved to Celebration with unrealistic expectations—the Magic Kingdom Syndrome." Others thought "that some of our residents [should] be more realistic about what is really possible." The responses reflect residents' tendency to define community in exclusionary terms, in this case by encouraging skeptics to leave. Occasionally, this bordered on the petulant: "we

47. Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, Calif., 1984), 217.

have a small group of complainers that keep unrest for all of us, if you don't like it here move out, no gates to hold you in."<sup>48</sup>

Such expressions are more in line with critical understandings of how "community" functions as an exclusionary process, supported by the construction of literal and metaphorical borders. In this sense, Celebration is a conceptual unity that is contingent on the construction of a "constitutive outside" for its relevance. The town's "community" is based on unifying and defining a series of characteristics and requirements that serve to set up boundaries for admission. The requirements are necessarily exclusive for they serve to define Celebration's particular community from other communities, making it only meaningful to say that one is a member of a community because it differentiates the individual from others.<sup>49</sup> The process of creating communities of exclusion in this fashion often results in the emergence of an "oppressive social form."<sup>50</sup>

Certainly, in Celebration a sense of the politics of exclusion is evident. A perceived threat from the "outside" is the Osceola County School Board who has made decisions not altogether consistent with the interests of many Celebration residents. The politics of exclusion are turned inwards also through a general feeling that those who do not like living in Celebration should leave.

At this juncture it would be impossible and unjust to overlook Celebration's situation in greater local and global relations. Celebration is an upper middle-class development dependent upon a historical context of corporate dominance over local and state governing bodies in Central Florida. Disney, since its earliest days, demanded from public authorities autonomy in developing its property in return for the promise of regional economic prosperity.<sup>51</sup> As a result of unadulterated growth in the intervening years, the landscape of Osceola and Orange counties changed from one characterized by small farming communities with vibrant small-town city centers—such as the Osceola County seat of Kissimmee—to an undifferentiated sub-

48. Anonymous open-ended survey response, August 1999.

49. Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," in Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York, 1990).

50. David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford, Eng., 1996), 437.

51. Richard Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse* (New Haven, Conn., 2001).

urban sprawl marked by chain hotels and restaurants and tourist strip malls. This, of course, is not a trend limited to Central Florida. In fact, economic growth coupled with little regard for planning and the abandonment of the traditional urban center has caused similar sprawl-like conditions to emerge in locales across the country.<sup>52</sup>

The unplanned growth of the suburban form has been concomitant with a large degree of social atomization and uprootedness that results in the alienation of people from place. Lewis Mumford, for example, saw the problem of the suburban form as manifest in the uncritical embrace of the automobile. Recalcitrant emphasis on building highways has resulted in the decrease of vibrant public spaces causing the "living tissue of the city" to suffer.<sup>53</sup> Suburbia's malaise, a blind faith in technological progress, and a general social dislocation contributes to the prevalence of the "culture of narcissism" that Christopher Lasch maintained supports "hostility and rejection" in American society.<sup>54</sup>

Ironically, relief from this narcissistic, hostile, and rejection-prone world is the desire of Celebration's residents. Even as Disney enabled dominant forms of suburban sprawl that contributed to this condition, it created a development like Celebration—a place for those who can afford to partake in Disney's commodified vision of a world lost to the chaos and impersonality of the present. Had Disney not actively attained its own municipal governing structure, ignored the regional implications of its development, and evaded subjection to critical oversight from public officials and citizens, perhaps Celebration's neighbor Kissimmee would be a quaint "Main Street" community unplagued by high crime rates and free from shouldering the debt for road projects designed to carry tourists unimpeded into the Disney compound.

Celebration, therefore, represents fundamentally a further extension of the early impetus for suburbanization which, as Lewis Mumford put it, amounts to an "effort to find a private solution for the depression and disorder of the befouled metropolis: an effusion of romantic taste but an evasion of civic responsibility and

52. Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York, 1991); Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York, 1987).

53. Mumford, *The City in History*, 510.

54. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, xviii.

municipal oversight."<sup>55</sup> Since Celebration is not "gated" it has received a good deal of press; but certain subtle borders still exist which serve the purpose of the gate.<sup>56</sup> The price to buy into Celebration automatically discriminates against the majority of working-class people—particularly those who work in the tourist industry of Osceola and Orange Counties where affordable housing is scarce. The high-income character of Celebration's residents gives substance to the class-based nature of the town and manifests as well in two other subtle indicators of the town's homogeneous ideological terrain—party affiliation and political disposition (see Tables 2 and 3). Even the highly touted and technologically advanced "networked" infrastructure that links Celebration's homes and apartments with fiber optic wiring to an electronic bulletin-board and web site is protected by a firewall making it impossible for computers not originating in the "celebration.fl.us" domain to view the town intranet.

Community and public engagement is important to Celebration residents on the micro-level, but this sentiment becomes less apparent when discussing relations with the "outside" world. Residents have critiqued the school for such things as "not [being] managed locally" or excoriated Disney for "bringing in many students from the outside."<sup>57</sup> What is defined as "local" or "outside" is of importance, for the use of these terms is indicative of a greater trend towards atomism and divestiture from the public sphere.

Yet, in this postmodern age of global capitalism, no community is isolated from the vagaries of the larger political economy.<sup>58</sup> The arrest of undocumented Mexican construction workers in Celebration in February 1998 attested to the town's inability to truly divest itself from the world. The development, construction, and continued operation of the town's nicely manicured public spaces, trendy restaurants, and recreational facilities are dependent upon workers coming from outside the community, even as far as Mexico.<sup>59</sup>

55. Mumford, *The City in History*, 492.

56. Carol Lawson, "Disney's Newest Show is a Town," *The New York Times*, 16 November 1995; Craig Wilson, "The Town that Disney Built," *USA Today*, 30 June 1997.

57. Anonymous open-ended survey response, August 1999.

58. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (New York, 1989).

59. Lenny Savino, "Border Patrol Arrests 16 Illegal Immigrants at Celebration Construction Site," *Orlando Sentinel*, 14 February 1998.



Table 2. Reported Income of Residents

Income Range	Number of Responses
\$10,000-\$30,000	3
\$30,001-\$55,000	30
\$55,001-\$70,000	25
\$70,001-\$95,000	60
\$95,001-\$110,000	23
\$110,001-\$135,000	26
\$135,001 & above	35
unreported	15

Table 3. Party Identification of Residents

Party	Number of Responses
Republican	65
Democrat	25
Libertarian	5
Taxpayers	3
Reform	2
Green	0

It is certainly too early to judge Celebration as a success or failure on its own terms or even to identify what such evaluations might mean. But the town's genesis and development appears a disturbing instance of a growing trend towards reliance on private corporations to provide solutions to public problems. Celebration may be a space of communal tranquility in a sea of unbridled megalopolistic development, but it cannot serve as an example for urban planning without understanding the greater socio-economic relations that shaped it. The relationship between insularity and connectedness that is evident in Celebration is representative of a dynamic process whose contradictions will percolate in ways unforeseen by Disney's imagineers.