

History of Themed Design as Pretext for Immersive Experiences

Taylor Gruber*

Abstract

Affirming the value of themed design within the growing landscape of immersive consumer experiences, this study emphasizes the critical role of integrative storytelling and entertainment in built environments. This project is driven by a fascination with storytelling through design that is rich in detail and narrative. These environments invite viewers to explore how space can convey a compelling story. One of the central goals of this research is to challenge and dispel the stigma that often surrounds themed entertainment as being “less-than” traditional architectural or design disciplines. Themed design requires meticulous attention to detail, creativity, and imagination; qualities that transform physical spaces into narrative-driven experiences. Despite its importance, this niche area of design is frequently misunderstood and undervalued. This study will explore the foundational role of themed design in hospitality and consumer spaces such as hotels, restaurants, and marketplace storefronts, particularly as the demand for immersive environments continues to rise. It highlights the subtle, often overlooked elements that contribute to the success of themed spaces which are visualized in hand-drawings, demonstrating how even the smallest details can connect purpose and emotion to the visitor can significantly impact the way the organization of space is perceived and felt.

1. Introduction

Themed design requires meticulous attention to detail, creativity, and imagination by the creative team; qualities that transform physical spaces into narrative-driven experiences. Successful themed design should communicate with visitors on a sensory and emotional level, forming a memory that exists independently of traditional space. Despite its importance, this niche area of design is frequently misunderstood and undervalued. This study will explore the foundational role of themed design in hospitality and consumer spaces, particularly as the demand for immersive environments continues to rise. By using hand-drawn construction drawings as a means of researching the scope of design detailing needed

to fabricate such intricate new spaces, and using a variety of photos for references and scaling I annotated four different moments captured at the Walt Disney World parks.

The Walt Disney Company honors employees on a biennial basis as “Legends” one of these pivotal “Legends” was Marty Sklar who served as both President and Vice President of Walt Disney Imagineering from 1987-1996. Marty Sklar defined the “formula” for designing the great guest experiences as the Ten Mickey Commandments in 1987. This precedent has been used across Disney’s worldwide parks and experiences ever since.

*Taylor Gruber (taygrubes@gmail.com) is a current fourth-year Architecture student at the University of Oregon. She is heavily involved in the College of Design Community; currently President and Founder of TEA (Themed Entertainment Association) at UO, PR Lead for FBD (Freedom By Design), and previously has held positions with AIAS (American Institute of Architecture Students). Taylors main interests within the design field do fall under themed design, as a creative person who was drawn to the field from artistic endeavors.

1.1. Research Question

“How has themed entertainment uniquely provided patterns of design for the rising field of immersive experiences?”

1.2. Inspiration and Context

Theme and story can be found at the heart of all environmental design, it just might not be so aggressively visible to the visitor as it will be at a theme park. Immersion is as simple as wish fulfillment, which is mass producing life-changing experiences. Even with healthcare, the better the guest experience, the better the outcome. Every experience needs a theme, just as every company needs a purpose. If show, retail, and food are seamlessly integrated, departmental barriers are broken down and presented to visitors as transformation.

In all businesses, it is important to monitor and respond to trends. A significant trend that was seen by all in the United States was the rise of the themed restaurant in the 1980s and 1990s. The list could go on indefinitely, but to name a few prominent examples: Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. is still around and was inspired by Forest Gump. Rainforest Café and Planet Hollywood are inspired by immersive locations and entertainment culture. Also, Harley Davidson Café and American Girl Doll Café are expansions of pre-existing brands. In contrast, the Hard Rock Café and ESPN Zone follow specific areas of culture as their design themes.



Eataly combines retail and hospitality into an Italian culinary marketplace complete with multiple restaurants and retail departments, a great example of both hospitality and consumer space. This project had a tremendous impact on the popularization of the food hall concept across the United States. The Eataly Experience is the first multifunctional marketplace dedicated to Italian excellence on a global scale. Eataly believes its success is linked to a philosophy that allows people to eat, shop, and learn about high-quality food within one environment. These are three activities that rarely coexist in a single space. Oscar Farinetti, the founder, envisioned creating a school, a market, and a table to gather around: a place to learn about food and, through food, about life. Eataly is an international success story for themed design within a traditional design environment. The company has won multiple design awards across various locations, including a Silver A' Design Award for Interior Design at the Toronto location in 2020 and another Silver A' Award in the same category two years later at the Ginza location.



In celebration of the third installment of the HBO® Original Series *The White Lotus*, where the Four Seasons Resort Koh Samui in Thailand served as a filming location, Four Seasons is bringing the cultural phenomenon to life across its global portfolio. As part of the global partnership between Four Seasons and Max, bookable and exclusive experiences have been developed to create immersive offerings that blend television storytelling with world-class hospitality. These include both special events for companies in partnership with Four Seasons for marketing campaigns, as well as limited high-end offerings. By blending media, branding, and hospitality, these niche experiences draw a new wave of users into a well-known and established company. The experiential marketing creates a personalized space for fans of a television series to enter the world they know and love. By hiring actors to play the role of staff, a hotel becomes a world only

previously seen on television and now physically accessible for guests to explore. With curated dining, wellness treatments, photo moments, and a screening of the show, a regular hotel stay becomes a one-of-a-kind experience.



Meow Wolf is an immersive art adventure that invites visitors to step inside, explore, and uncover the unexpected. With a mission to inspire creativity in people's lives through art, exploration, and play, the organization seeks to demonstrate how imagination can transform the world. By valuing creative collaboration, provocative playfulness, inclusivity, authentic compassion, and bold risk-taking, the guest becomes part of the worldview and actively participates in the story. With five locations (Santa Fe, Las Vegas, Denver, Grapevine, and Houston), the organization presents one multiverse connected through a continuous storyline. Meow Wolf started in 2008 as a small collective of Santa Fe artists who shared an interest in publicly exhibiting their work and developing their skills collaboratively. The

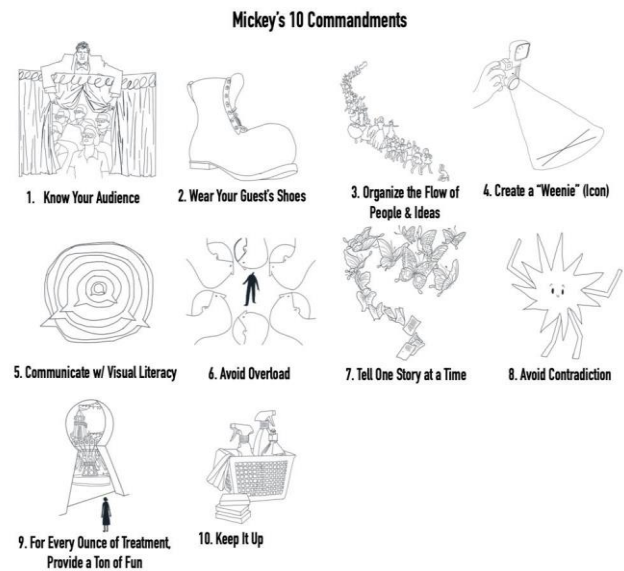
collaborative approach blossomed into Meow Wolf's distinctive style of immersive, maximalist environments that encourage audience-driven experiences. Meow Wolf's unique approach to themed design turns a museum into one overall art installation for the audience to walk through and explore, challenging conventional spatial boundaries. Adults become children again, learning through exploration and adventuring within a never-before-seen environment.



2. Methodology

Daniel Jenkins is a licensed architect who has a passion for themed design. He previously worked at Walt Disney Imagineering before founding his own firm, while also becoming a published author and running the blog Theme Park Architect. He states that the rise of immersive experiences became widely visible approximately a decade ago. Theme parks and themed entertainment traditionally did not use this terminology. The model first began in smaller venues that appeared in places that would not traditionally support a theme park. He explains that before the widespread use of the term immersive experiences, the industry operated under the broader category of themed entertainment, referring to story-driven design outside of theme parks. There is no major difference between what themed design, themed entertainment, and immersive experiences aim to accomplish in

terms of design. All seek to transport visitors beyond their regular day-to-day environments. What differs is the way immersive experiences market themselves to visitors and how they navigate building codes. Immersive experiences tend to be sold as pop-up shops or visiting attractions rather than as permanently built environments.



Daniel Jenkins noted that there are three additional design phases when practicing themed entertainment versus traditional commercial design. These take place prior to the traditional Schematic Design, Design Development, Construction Documents, Bidding and Construction Administration phases typically taught in architecture education. The themed design process instead begins with Blue Sky, Concept Development, and Feasibility, which allow storytelling elements and financial metrics to develop in tandem. Blue Sky is where ideation happens and the theme begins, establishing the overall vision. Concept Development is where the narrative is layered onto the original visual framework. Feasibility is when the business partners evaluate the probability of the project

idea and determine the funding required to launch it. From Feasibility, the project transitions into the original design phases of Schematic Design and Design Development. In these two phases, the idea and narrative are translated into early design concepts and then refined into a more detailed plan. The remaining phases lead up to constructing and installing the environment into its intended setting. There are many project ideas that never leave Blue Sky or secure funding during Feasibility. These design phases, paired with the guiding principles known as Mickey's Commandments, act as a formula for maintaining high-quality guest experiences, using Magic Kingdom as a benchmark for excellence. These design tools can be seen naturally over time as themed restaurants rebranded into fully designed restaurant experiences, evolving from being centered on a theme into something closer to dinner and a show in a whole new environment. With the rise of technological capabilities, the idea of an experience catered around dining has expanded even more to curated museums. The use of 3D projection mapping transforms previously familiar spaces into something new, with themed clubs with curated drink menus. By supporting the overlay of themed drinks and dining and placing that in a new light, the rise of movie dining experiences, traveling exhibits like the Ice Cream Museum, and the Lego House Mini Chef Restaurant present the consumer with a story in which they actively participate throughout a meal. The growth and development of the experience demonstrate Blue Sky and Concept Development phases in real time, yet within traditional typologies of hospitality and restaurant design.

Daniel Jenkins has noted that the trend of immersive experiences has amplified the expectations of themed entertainment. The rise of technological adaptation and competition has continued to raise guest expectations for

immersion. Ten or fifteen years ago, a flat cityscape that follows your movement throughout a ride would be impressive; however, now guests expect backgrounds to be using 3D projection mapping or virtual reality. A good example of this larger scale shift can be seen at Disney's Hollywood Studios Theme Park. The original concept was meant to show how movies were made, taking visitors directly into animation studios or soundstages, where a steel structure could effectively communicate the story. However, according to Jenkins, guests now want to be part of the movie, changing the whole park's concept. With the exponential rise in technology, the mystery of how movies are made has diminished. By following the guest expectations and wishes, the intention of the park has shifted toward allowing visitors to relive the scenes from the film and feel as though they are inside the movie. That may be ride immersion and show set or walking through Batuu with highly detailed architecture and Stormtroopers roaming in character.

3. Design Elements

The TEA/AECOM Theme Index and Museum Index is a collaboration between the Themed Entertainment Association (TEA) and the economics practice at AECOM, a global provider of technical, professional and management support services. The report ranks the top worldwide theme parks, amusement parks, water parks, museums, and theme park group operators by attendance, while also identifying industry trends are identified. The TEA is a major supporter of themed design practices internationally, with a scope broad enough to connect major industry leaders such as The Walt Disney Company and Universal Destinations & Experiences, as well as family-run parks such as Holiday World &

Splashin' Safari and Karls Erlebnis-Dorf. It is a community run organization built by and for creators, providing educational support and open connections to the industry. I plan to reference this Index as a means to quantify a rise in immersive experiences. The top-attended parks and museums serve as clear indicators of the overall state of the industry and associated trends. In addition, trends and activities at the top-attended parks and museums signal both what is currently occurring in the industry more broadly and what is likely to occur in the future.

The hospitality industry was changed forever from the COVID-19 pandemic, which halted travel indefinitely in a location-based entertainment industry. As the industry moves forward, there has been continued emphasis on enhancing guest experiences, making strategic investments, and leveraging intellectual property as strategies for sustaining growth and success across the global theme park and museum landscape. Disneyland Park set the precedent of a family vacation in a certain city for a centralized entertainment destination. The hospitality industry requires travel, but the themed design industry is specifically made for and run by visitors.

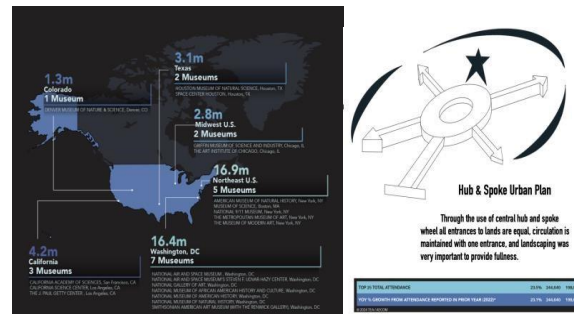
TOP 25 TOTAL ATTENDANCE	23.5%	244,640	198,016
YOY % GROWTH FROM ATTENDANCE REPORTED IN PRIOR YEAR (2022)*	23.1%	244,640	198,696

© 2024 TEA/AECOM

One of the newly evolved recorded sub-sectors is wellbeing attractions, which cater to the rising demand for health and wellness leisure offerings post-pandemic, such as thermal baths or sound baths that are integral to the product offering. Themed design continues to follow the ever-changing needs of consumers, adapting to wherever those needs may lead a global shut-down.

Museums have begun to face challenges maintaining attendance due to rising

competition from immersive traveling exhibits and other new entertainment options, such as the work of OGX Productions. International tourism levels continue to stay below pre-pandemic levels in major cities, with museums operating at roughly 70 percent of their 2019 attendance. Competition for limited leisure time and discretionary spending across the themed entertainment spectrum means that museums must continue to innovate to remain relevant and appealing to audiences. Some museums have offset reduced tourist visitation by increasing engagement with local residents through new programming, temporary exhibits, food and beverage events, and membership strategies



4. Materials & Techniques

A major design tool specifically highlighted in themed design is the focus on detail. It is these small movements and connections across all realms of work in this field that allow the viewer to feel transported across worlds. When asked about his favorite detail designed in a themed project, Jenkins immediately referenced moments that do not follow a traditional style of architecture. Specifically, the Seven Dwarfs Mine Train at Magic Kingdom, where the source material originated from a decades-old 2D film, requiring the design team to translate animation into a 3D built environment. The animation of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was inspired by real architectural styles such as English Cottage. However, the design required original

interpretation, often avoiding straight lines and conventional geometry. Even minute details such as proportions became complex design challenges. Designers must interpret scale 2D images, having to scale a dwarf to a human and then comparing those sizes to the mountain that holds the ride mechanics. The translation exemplifies the complexity of themed design.

5. Conclusion

Walt Disney stated that Disneyland would never truly be finished, but would continue evolving as long as imagination exists, and that it was a place he could continually mold and shape.

Themed Design, as a subset of design that is constantly changing and evolving, with a focus on consumers trends and niche interests. As the hospitality industry continues to shift and rebrand post-pandemic, leaning more into a technology focus, the immersive experience will only continue to become more prevalent in the Themed Design space. The use of storytelling through design does not need to be limited to themed design or immersive experiences. Story within a built space can be used for circulation pathways, to highlight historic elements in a space, or even to expand on a concept. By gaining a better understanding of the detail, thought, and story-driven efforts that go into creating a themed space, my hope is that a stronger design foundation in these elements will extend further into the broader field of design, especially hospitality and consumer spaces. As guests continue to have higher expectations for quality and craft thanks to the rise of technologies, these design processes may continue to expand into non-themed realms. There is much that can be learned from such a successful and innovative

precedent that inspired generations of ideas in suit.

Bob Weis has reflected that dreams continually pull individuals forward, often feeling just out of reach, and that pursuit becomes worthwhile when those dreams manifest into something meaningful and transformative. When a dream aligns with one's aspirations, it becomes something worth pursuing indefinitely.

6. Reflection

Throughout my time at the University of Oregon, I have been introduced to a wide variety of building typologies. I became curious if themed design might have some typologies of its own. Through Jenkins, I learned that there are more defined or rigid typologies than one might expect. In some ways, themed design is a history book of its own, calling upon and referencing historical global styles to find detail precedents, and combining these successful designs into new interpretations to meet guest expectations of space, yet still appear otherworldly.

When deciding on this research project, I knew I needed to draw my favorite moments from the parks, as well as Jenkins' favorite. I've done many perspective sketches, but to best showcase the level of detail that goes into themed design, I challenged myself to create technical and scaled construction drawings. I've included callouts as well for context to provide greater clarity at a larger scale. By capturing these exotic designs in a scaled drawing, I've gained a new understanding and appreciation for attention to design details. Studying the architecture in a moderated way translates the 3D form into a 2D reference point, reinforcing the precision required in themed environments.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my mentor Daniel Jenkins for his constant support and contributions to this passion project of mine. I would not have been able to complete this work without him. As well as TEA and IAAPA for their technical information and wisdom regarding the field.

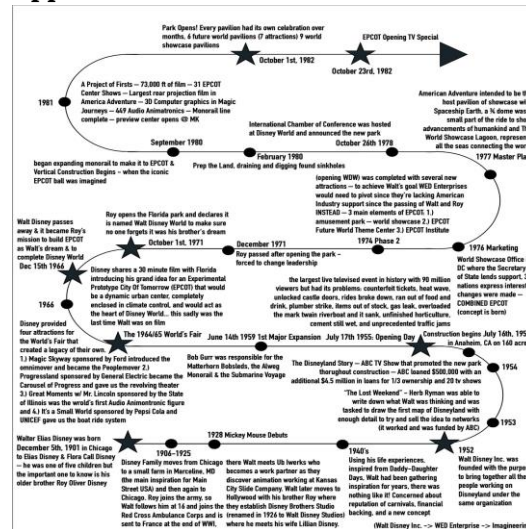
References

- “Authentic Italian Products, Restaurants, Cooking Classes.” Eataly, www.eataly.com/us_en. Accessed 13 May 2025.
- Bob Rogers, Bob Weis, Joe Pine, and Margaret Kerrison, panelists. Legends 2024: Legends Who Share Their Secrets Panel. International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions Expo, 18 November 2024, Orange County Convention Center, Orlando, FL.
- “Bringing Together the Creators & Makers of Experiences Worldwide.” Themed Entertainment Association, www.teaconnect.org/. Accessed 13 May 2025.
- Brown, Cynthia. “Redefining Immersive Experiences.” International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions Expo, 18 November 2024, Orange County Convention Center, Orlando, FL. Speaker.
- “Eataly.” Eataly: TPG Architecture, www.tpgarchitecture.com/portfolio/Eataly-nyc. Accessed 13 May 2025.
- Jenkins, J. Daniel. Phone Interview. 30 April 2025.
- Kelly, Corrie. “Disney Heritage,” 2024. Disney Programs.
- Latreille, Jenny. “17 Themed Restaurants from the 90s, Ranked.” Tasting Table, Tasting Table, 4 June 2023, www.tastingtable.com/1301208/themed-restaurants-nineties-ranked/.
- Leeman, Jake. “The Power of Pop-Up Experiences.” Legacy Marketing, 20 Apr. 2024, www.legacymarketing.com/the-power-of-pop-up-experiences-in-todays-retail-landscape/.
- Martin Sklar, Walt Disney Imagineering, Education vs. Entertainment: Competing for audiences, AAM Annual meeting, 1987
- “Meow Wolf | Immersive Art Experiences & Interactive Exhibits.” MeowWolf, meowwolf.com/. Accessed 13 May 2025.
- Nicklaus, Amanda. “Welcome to ‘The White Lotus’ (or Its Successful Brand Activation).” SCM Demo, 1 May 2025, www.specialevents.com/social-events/untitled.
- OGX Productions. OGX PRODUCTIONS. (n.d.). <https://www.ogxproductions.com/>

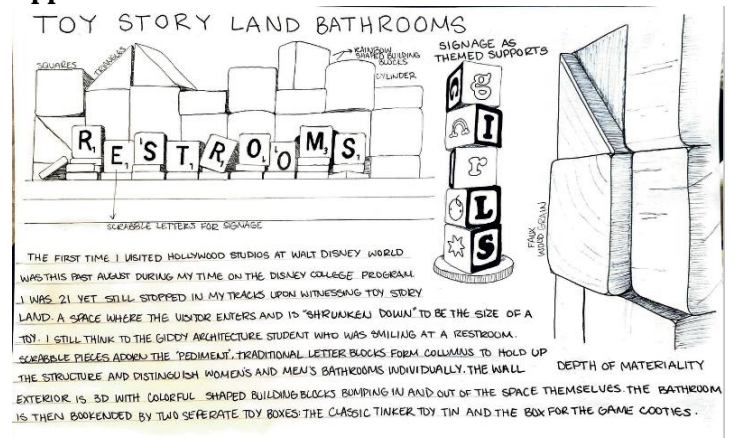
- Planet Hollywood. Planet Hollywood New York, <https://www.nyctourism.com/restaurants/planet-hollywood-new-york/>. Accessed 2 Dec. 2025.
- Ross, George. *How Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. Capitalized On A '90s Movie To Become An International Seafood Chain*. 28 July 2025. Getty Image, <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thetakeout.com%2F1920999%2Fbubba-gump-shrimp-co-90s-movie-seafood-chain%2F&psig=AOvVaw1OK7chnnhX6YGbzbPjz6&ust=1764804649443000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBYQjRxqFwoTCMi90umHoJEDFQAAAAAAdAAAAABAV>. Accessed 2 Dec. 2025.
- “Success Stories: Brands That Have Transformed Pop-up Stores into Unforgettable Experiences: Go-Popup Magazine.” Go-PopUp, 1 Mar. 2024, magazine.gopopup.com/en/success-storiesbrands-that-have-transformed-pop-up-stores-into-unforgettable-experiences/.
- Weis, Bob. DreamChasers. NewYork, Disney Editions, 2024.

Appendices

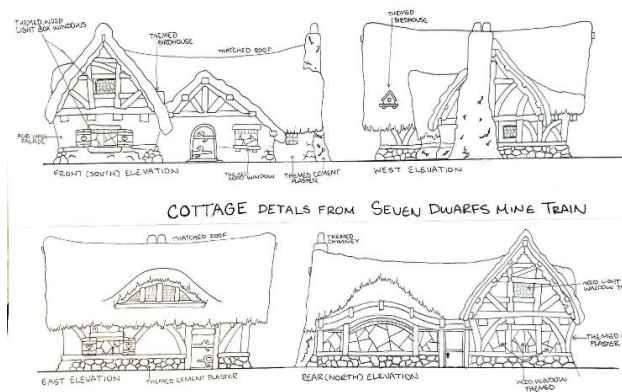
Appendix A:



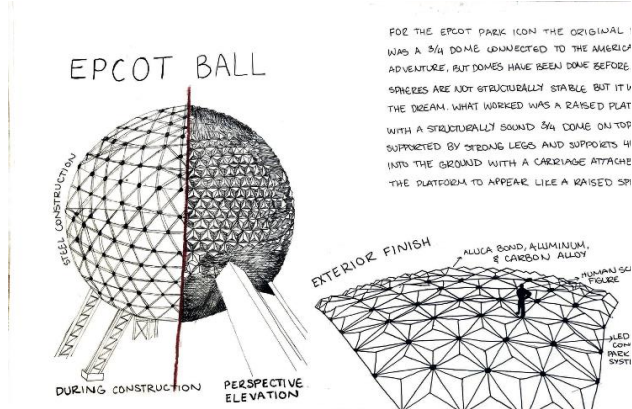
Appendix B:



Appendix C:



Appendix D:



Appendix E:

