



History of Themed Design as Pretext for Immersive Experiences

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Introduction

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. Inspired by my time at the Disney College Program: particularly with planning that captures memorable, immersive moments in the parks, as well as being encouraged to learn more about IAAPA (International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions) and TEA (Themed Entertainment Association). 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.

Research Question

“How has themed entertainment provided guidance and structure for the rising design field of immersive experiences?”

Inspiration & Context

As defined by Cynthia Brown leading seminar at IAAPA Expo “Redefining Immersive Experience” the definition of Immersive Experiences is “effective immersive experiences engage visitors on a sensory and emotional level, transporting them from their everyday lives and providing a deeper connection to the content. It does not have to be interactive.”

When asking Daniel Jenkins when he first saw the rise of “immersive experiences” he answered simply. “Close to a decade ago is when (I) really saw it emerging on the broader scale. Theme parks and themed entertainment never use that word “immersive experiences” so to speak. A lot of this started in smaller venues, that popped up in places that would never have a theme park but would have these things.” He expanded to add on that prior to the movement of “immersive experiences” there was, “themed entertainment which meant anything story driven outside a theme park that would pop up over the years.”

Behind the Scenes w/ Imagineering was a six hour long educational offering, in which the Blue Sky Breakfast & Journey Into Imagineering introduced learning about the design process for such a large concept such as a ride or new land. Being given a blue sky concept where we start at the end of the blue sky step of design and breaking into concept. We were thrown curve balls to navigate challenges before the deadline hits

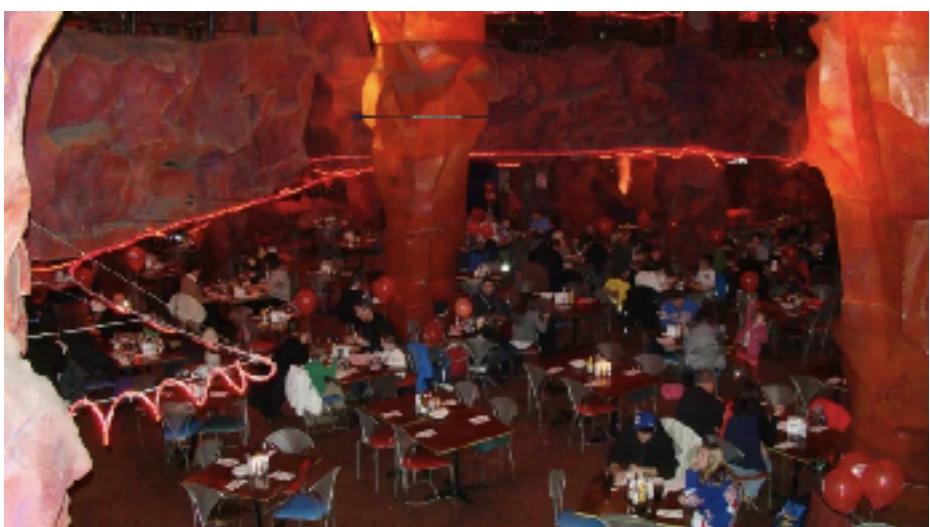
IAAPA Expo “Legends 2024: Legends Who Share Their Secrets” – storytelling is part of experience staging – integrate show, retail & food as seamless breaking down departmental barriers & sell transformation. Mass produce lifechanging experiences. Wish fulfillment IS immersion. Even so far as healthcare – the better the guest experience, the better the outcome is. Every experience needs a theme, just like every company needs a purpose. Museums are pushing the boundaries of what we know, travelling outside of their sphere.

80s/90s rise of themed restaurants – Bubba Gump Shrimp Co, Rainforest Cafe, American Girl Doll Cafe, Space Aliens Grill & Bar, Mars 2112, Harley Davidson Cafe, Planet Hollywood, Jekyll & Hyde club, Hard Rock Cafe, ESPN Zone, Ed Debevic’s

Eataly combines retail and hospitality into an Italian culinary marketplace complete with multiple restaurants and retail departments. This project had a tremendous impact on the popularization of the food hall concept across the United States. “The Eataly Experience” the very first multifunctional marketplace dedicated to Italian excellence in the world. “Eataly’s success is linked to our philosophy, because people can eat, shop and learn, all about high-quality food, three activities that don’t coexist anywhere else.” – Oscar Farinetti He wanted to create a school, a market, a table to gather around: a place to learn about food and, through food, about life. Fifteen years later, there are over 40 locations across the world, from New York City to Milano to Dubai.

In celebration of the third installment of the HBO® Original Series The White Lotus, where 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 will create immersive offerings that blend TV magic with world-class hospitality. These include both special events for large brands or companies in partnership with The Four Seasons for marketing campaigns, as well as, limited high-end offerings.

Meow Wolf is an immersive art adventure – step inside, explore, and uncover the unexpected. Our mission is to inspire creativity in people’s lives through art, exploration, and play so that imagination will transform our worlds. Valuing creative collaboration, provocative playfulness, outsiders welcome, authentic compassion, and audacious courage. Five locations (santa fe, las vegas, denver, grapevine, and houston) one multiverse. Meow Wolf started in 2008 as a small collective of Santa Fe artists sharing an interest in publicly displaying their works and developing their skills together. This collaborative approach blossomed into Meow Wolf’s distinctive style of immersive, maximalist environments that encourage audience-driven experiences. Event Planning, Artist Collaborations.



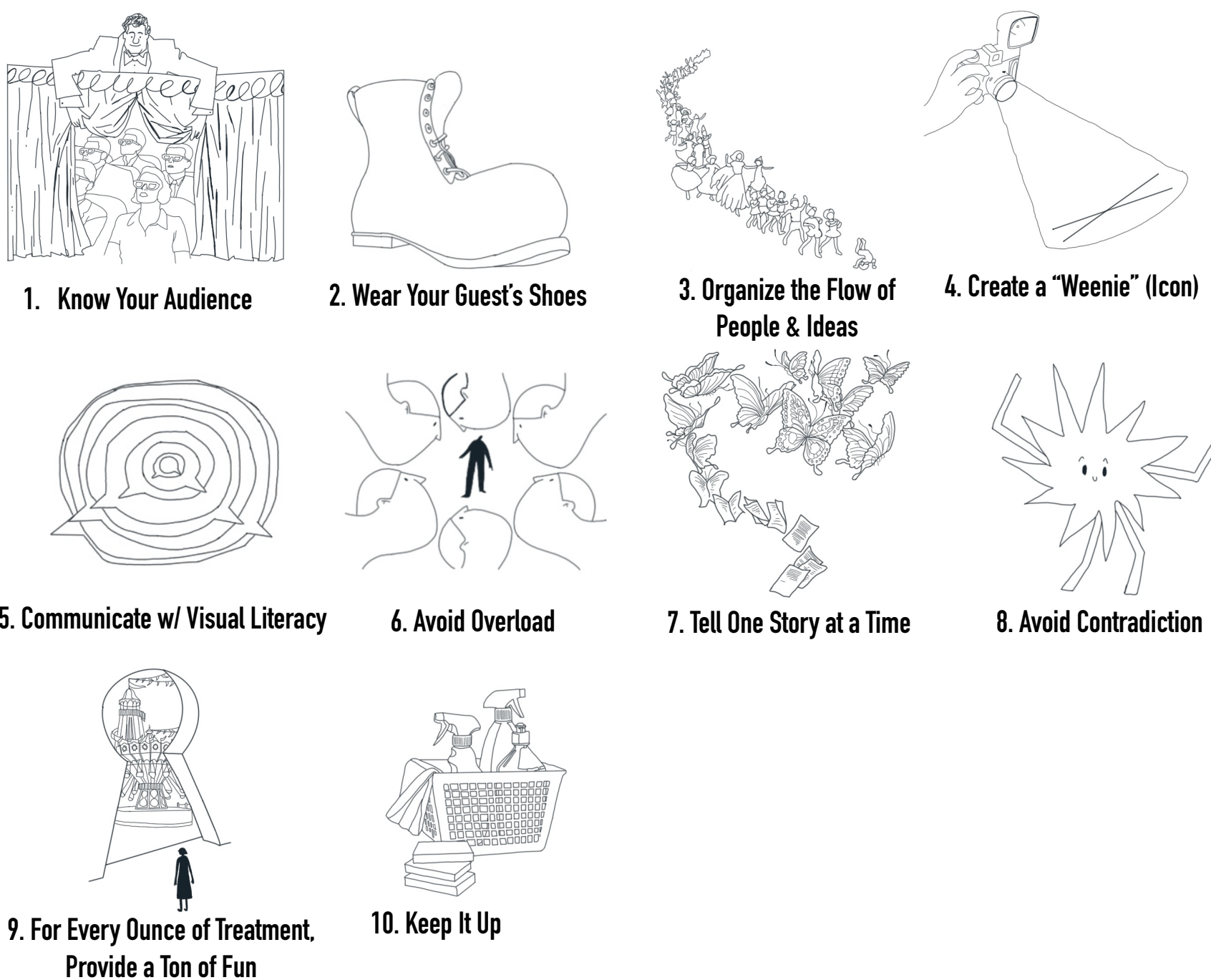
Mars 2112, open 1998-2012



Meow Wolf Convergence Station, opened 2021

Methodology

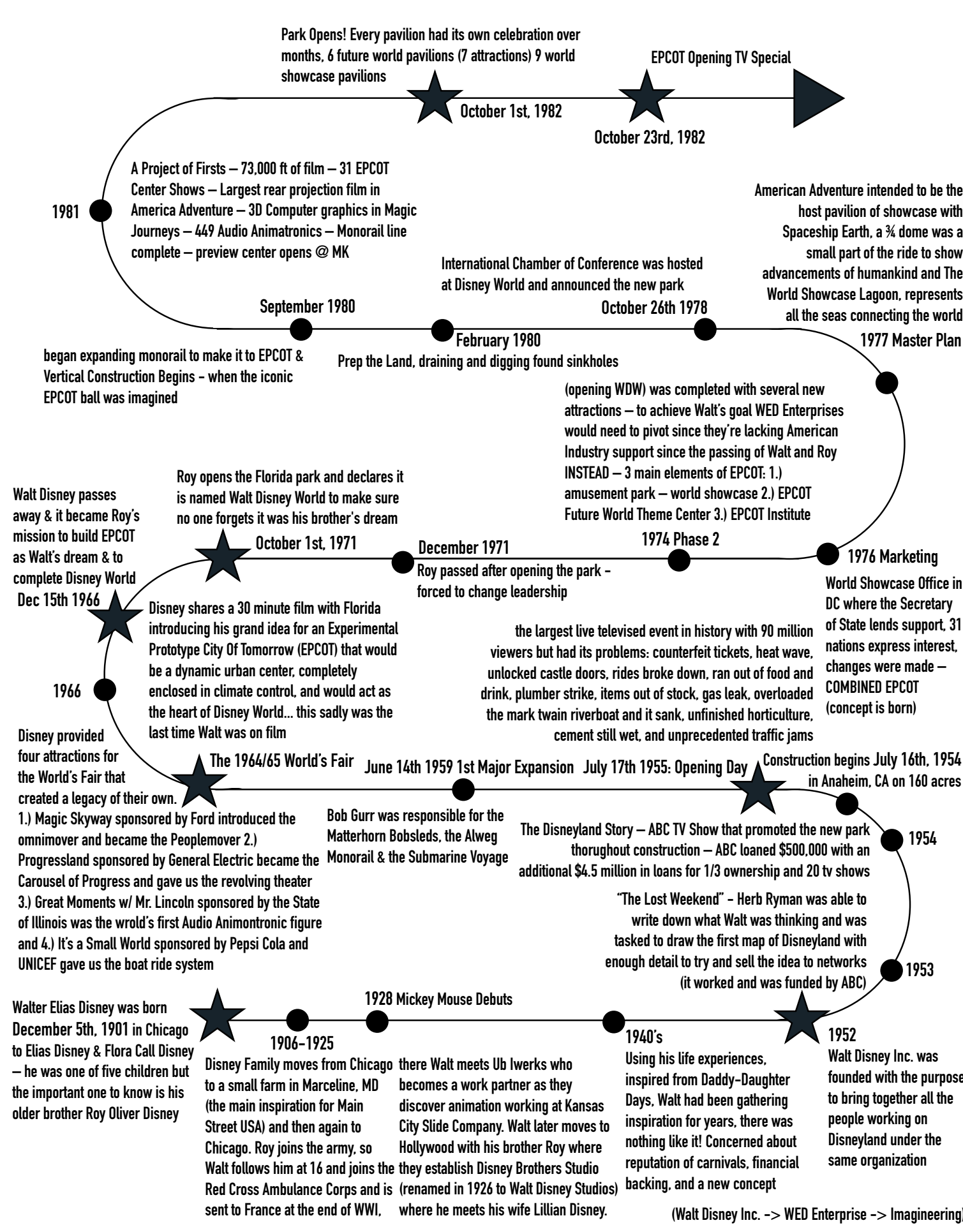
Mickey’s 10 Commandments



Daniel Jenkins noted that there are three more additional design phases when practicing design in themed entertainment versus commercial design. These phases take place prior to the traditional Schematic Design, Design Development, Construction Documents, Bidding and Construction Administration. Rather beginning with Blue Sky, Concept, and Feasibility to layer and develop the storytelling elements as well financial metrics. There are many project ideas that never leave Blue Sky or gain funding by the end of Feasibility. These design phases paired with “Mickey’s Commandments” act as a formula for maintaining high quality guest experience, resting on the benchmark of Magic Kingdom.

Themed restaurants rebranded as designed restaurant experiences and then with the rise of technologies capabilities it has just expanded even more to curated museums and 3D mapping and themed clubs

Disney Park History Timeline



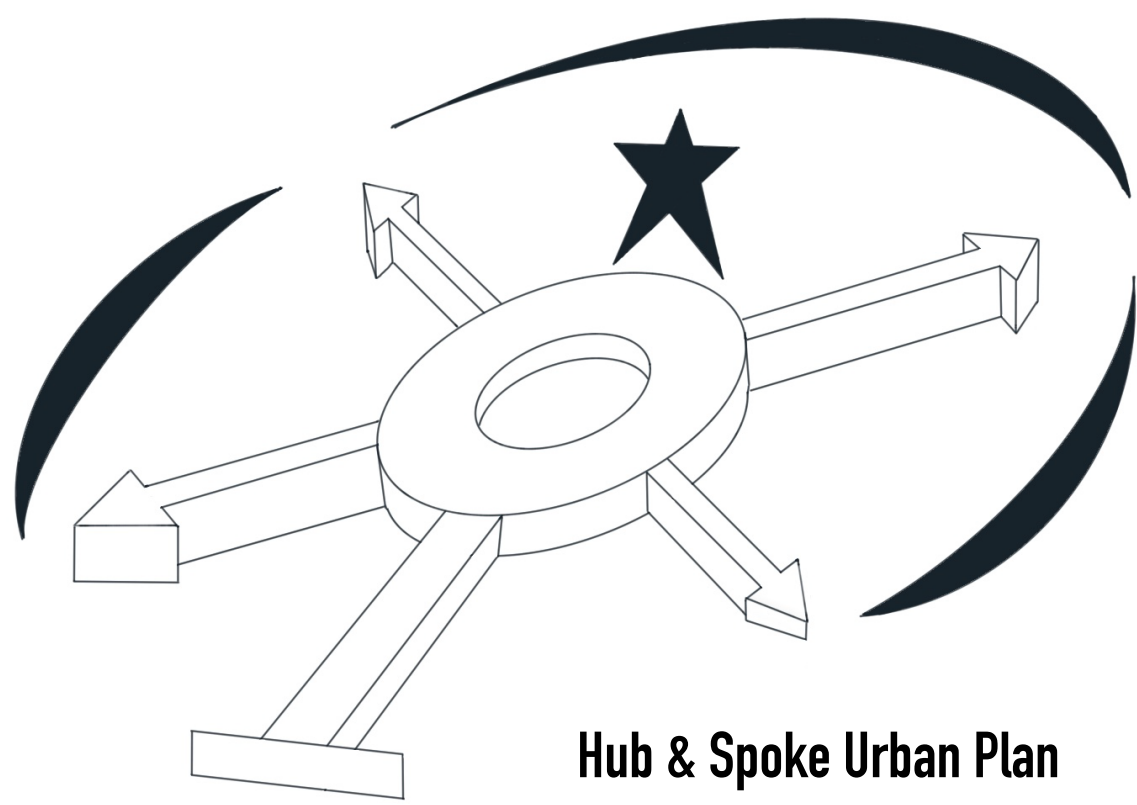
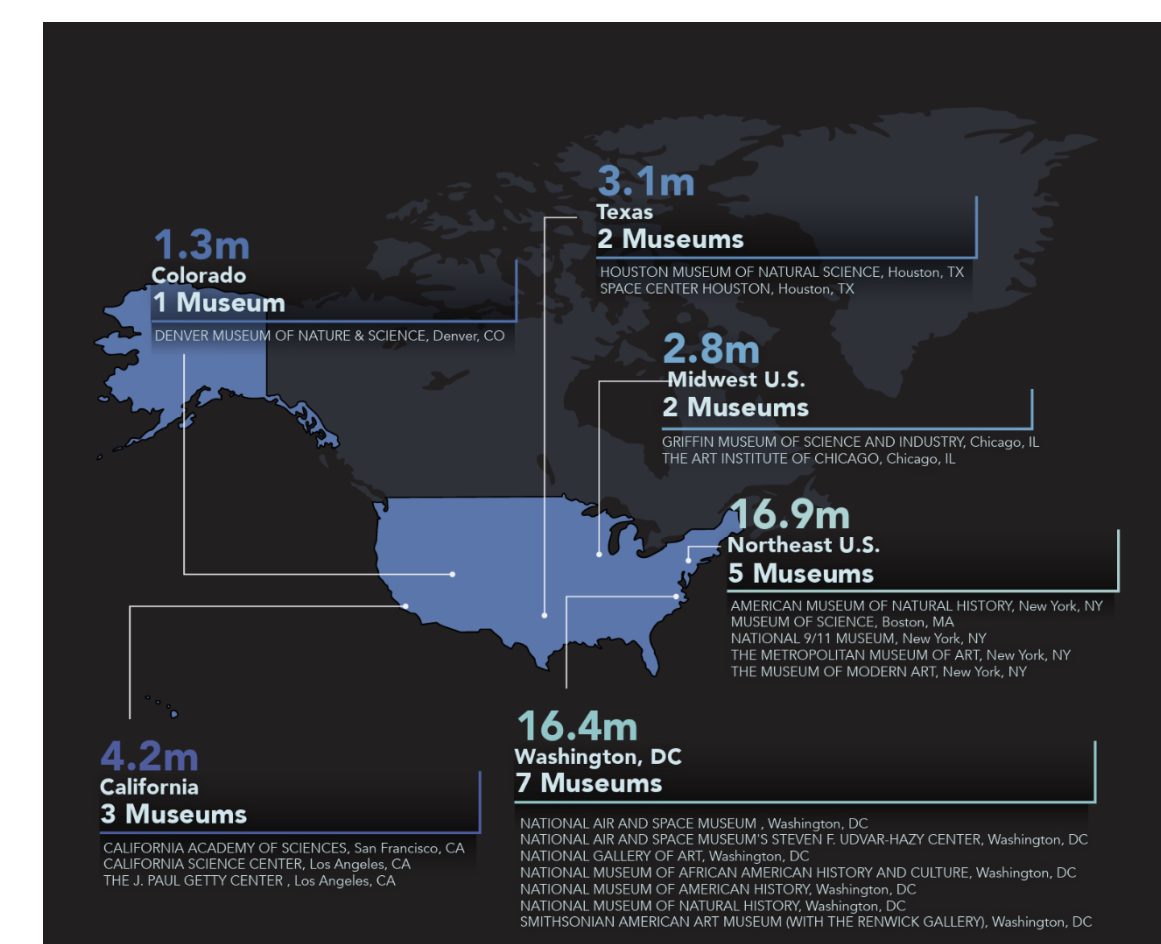
Design Elements

The TEA/AECOM Theme Index and Museum Index is a collaboration of the TEA and the economics practice at AECOM, a global provider of technical-professional and management-support services. Top worldwide theme parks, amusement parks, water parks, museums and theme park group operators are named, ranked by attendance, and industry trends are identified. I plan to reference this Index as a means to quantify a rise in immersive experiences. The top-attended parks and museums are a clear indicator 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, as well as what is likely to occur in the future.

The hospitality industry was changed forever from the COVID-19 pandemic, and as the industry moves forward there has been a continued emphasis on enhancing guest experiences, strategic investments, and leveraging IP are all key in sustaining growth and success across the global theme park and museum landscape.

There has been a new sub-sector called “wellbeing attractions” that caters to the rising demand for health and wellness alongside leisure offerings, for example thermal baths or sound baths that are integral to the product offering.

Museums have begun to face challenges maintaining attendance with new rising competition from “immersive traveling exhibits” and other new entertainment options. Competition for brief leisure time and money across the themed entertainment spectrum means that museums must continue to innovate to remain relevant and appeal to audiences. Some museums have been able to replace reduced number of tourist visits with local residents through new programming, temporary exhibits, food and beverage events, and membership strategies.



Hub & Spoke Urban Plan

Through the use of central hub and spoke wheel all entrances to lands are equal, circulation is maintained with one entrance, and landscaping was very important to provide fullness.



Daniel Jenkins has noted that the trend of “immersive experiences” have amplified the expectations of themed entertainment. Guests are now expecting the best-of-the-best. Whereas ten or fifteen years ago, a previous flat cityscape that follows your movement throughout a ride, the guests now want it to be in 3D using projection mapping, or virtual reality. A good example of this larger scale we are witnessing would be the Disney Hollywood Studios Theme Park. The original concept was meant to show how movies were made, taking you straight to the animation studio or soundstage, and a steel structure was able to get the story across. But now, in his experience, Jenkins has seen guests want to be an actual part of the movie, changing the whole park concept. With the exponential rise in technology the mystery of how movies are made is gone. By following the guests expectations and wishes, the intention of the park has become more so to relive the scenes of the movie and to be “in” the movie

Materials & Techniques

“We let story inform everything we do. We not only design buildings and spaces, but we also establish themes, time periods, historical context, and we choreograph the guest experience, as if it was their own movie, scene by scene. Architecture can set the stage for the story, but it can also tell the story. What we do involves design for entertainment, and design as entertainment.” – Bob Weis

When asked what his favorite detail was he designed in a themed design project, Jenkins immediately responded stating any time where it is not based on or following a traditional style of architecture. Specifically, the Seven Dwarfs Mine Train in Magic Kingdom, where the references are 2D film that is decades old and testing your design capabilities translating an animated film into a 3D building. Of course, the animation of Snow White was inspired by real styles such as English Cottage, but the 3D design is mostly made out of the blue with no straight lines. Such minute details such as proportions. What are the proportions? You’re going off 2D images having to scale a dwarf to a human and then comparing those sizes to the mountain that holds the ride mechanics. That was interesting.



Throughout my time at the University of Oregon I have been introduced to a wide variety of “building typologies.” I was curious if themed design may have some typologies of their own. Jenkins informed me that there are typologies but not nearly as defined or rigid as what one might think. In some ways, themed design is a history book of its own. Needing to pull from so many different architectural styles all across the world for inspiration.

When deciding this research project I knew I needed to draw my favorite moments from the parks. 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, scaled, construction drawings. I’ve included callouts as well for context or more understanding on a larger scale.

Reference technical detail drawings on nearby table

Conclusion

“Disneyland will never be completed. It will continue to grow as long as there is imagination left in the world.” & “Disneyland is a thing that I can keep molding & shaping” – Walt Disney

The terminology of “immersive experience” has found its spotlight as yet another rebranding of a technology driven, more focused built themed design moment. 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 over these elements will be further taken into the field, especially hospitality and consumer spaces. As guests continue to have higher and higher expectations for quality and craft thanks to the rise of technologies, these design processes may continue to expand further into non-themed realms. The COVID-19 pandemic has still not been fully processed by our communities, and the way it has impacted our social culture, significantly our leisure time, is still to be discovered: who is to say that this rise in “immersive experiences,” aka entering another world, is not connected to that social gap experienced world-wide. The use of storytelling through design does not need to be limited to themed design or immersive experiences. Story through a built space can be used for circulation pathways, a way to highlight historic elements in a space, or even just to expand on a concept. There is much that can be learned from such a successful and innovative precedent that inspired generations of ideas in suit.

“Dreams are elusive, and always pulling at you. They seem always to be right around the corner. But you never really know what you’re chasing, until you catch it. If it turns out to be real magic, the chase will have been worth it./f a dream is truly a “Wish Your Heart Makes,” then I plan to keep chasing them for a long, long time.” – Bob Weis

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