

Fantasy Urbanism: Theme Parks as Blueprints for Better Cities

By Irene Yitan Xue

AUTHOR BIO

Irene Yitan Xue is a sophomore high school student based in California. She has a strong passion for architectural design and aspires to pursue advanced studies in architecture in the future. Beyond academics, Irene is deeply committed to community engagement and public service. She actively participates in various community and philanthropic initiatives and is the founder of Hers Foundation.

ABSTRACT

This research assesses theme parks as ideal micro-cities, identifying some of their admirable characteristics relevant to modern urban planning. It argues that theme parks, such as EPCOT and Disneyland, depict controlled aspects of urban design aimed towards a specific goal: human enjoyment. This human-oriented spatial architecture is missing in modern cities such as Los Angeles. Some of the urban challenges identified include car dependency and poor public space. The research uses New Urbanism and Theme Park Urbanism theoretical frameworks to criticize LA's Euclidean zoning approach and assess the immersive, narrative-steered settings, respectively. The key research questions are summarized into the lessons modern city planners can pick from theme parks' regulated spatial aspect and how LA can use these lessons to enhance city experience. The recommended methodology for this study should assess EPCOT and Disneyland theme parks via visitors' views on these parks. One of the expected outcomes is to derive a framework of design strategies from theme parks that can be adapted to urban settings.

Keywords: *Theme parks, Disneyland, EPCOT, new urbanism, Euclidean zoning, spatial narrative, form-based codes, Los Angeles*

INTRODUCTION

If one walks Main Street in Disneyland, they would see an idyllic suburban 1950s American town. The history of theme parks in the US is an essential part of the story of 20th-century urban planning. Theme parks have historically been considered utopian copies of real cities. Their historical belonging to 20th-century urban planning underpins an essential design approach: crafting human enjoyment. However, theme parks' seeming public belonging is overpowered by a harsher reality, one that controls them, turning them into closed systems and private top-down domains.

In contrast, real cities are, with few exceptions, organic. They're chaotic, constantly evolving, mostly bottom-up, open-ended systems that cannot be as easily regulated. Los Angeles, thanks in part to its use of Euclidean zoning, is one of the most sprawling examples of a car-centric and dispersed city. As such, according to Mayer (2016), people interpret it as one giant suburb that suffers from a lack of human engagement and interaction, as well as poor quality of public spaces.

Thus, the research questions are:

1. What can city planners and architects learn from these quasi-urban environments, such as Disneyland, to improve the conditions of the cities they design?
2. What specifically can Los Angeles learn from theme park design, in order to create more engaging and human-centered urban environments?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Euclidean Zoning

Euclidean zoning divides land into residential, commercial and industrial areas. It was established in the United States in 1926, after the Supreme Court ruled that the government had authority to regulate land use (Brown, 2024). It was promoted to address housing shortages, health concerns due to population density, unregulated industrial facilities, air pollution, and noise issues. Although these were pressing concerns at the time, they are now obsolete. Residents no longer need protection from industrial areas. This change is attributed to a drop in American manufacturing employment, from 32% in 1900 to 8% today (Brown, 2024). Pollution also became less concerning as more effective control methods and stricter government regulations were put into place, at both federal and local levels. Furthermore, contemporary building codes now require that residential and multi-family homes meet proper living conditions, alleviating traditional health risks.

Over time, Euclidean zoning has created a number of problems, such as artificially restricting the housing supply, driving up home prices as demand continues to increase. A unique feature of Euclidean zoning that other zoning laws do not include is that it considers single-family residences as a separate category. As such, Euclidean zoning makes it harder to create multi-family homes (Brown, 2024). Because of Euclidean zoning, Los Angeles continues to suffer a housing crisis, as there are simply not

enough homes to accommodate its growing population. Euclidean zoning fails to address the current housing crisis as it tends to promote single-family and semi-detached housing.

Historical Context of Urban Planning in Los Angeles

During the late 19th and early 20th century, Los Angeles experienced significant growth. It was driven by the discovery of oil, the completion of transnational railroads, the expansion of the aerospace industry, the rise of Hollywood, and the development of new port facilities (Planetizen, n.d.). In 1900, Los Angeles had about 3.7 people per acre, but by the 1920s and 1930s, the population surged from 577,000 people to more than 1.2 million people (Fernandez et al., n.d.). As such, real estate development was booming in order to keep up with the city's growing population. In 1921, the first major street plan and municipal zones were enacted, including single-family residences, multi-family residences, businesses, light industrials, and heavy industrial zones (Fernandez et al., n.d.). By 1930, the zoning codes were revised again to meet the demands of the city's growth. Ordinance 66.750 outlined how land was allocated by dividing areas into residential, commercial or manufacturing zones. After the passing of Ordinance 66.750, single family residences reached their peak, comprising 93.7% of LA homes (Fernandez et al., n.d.).

However, most of LA's development was left unregulated, creating a heavily capitalistic urban plan. Unregulated development of the city and substandard subdivision practices led to the formation of incomplete neighborhoods and promoted the segregation of land uses (Fernandez et al., n.d.). Therefore, the economic boom of the 1920s resulted in the separation of residential and commercial spaces, as well as more car-centric planning and the decline of trains, as more people could afford their own car.

Los Angeles experienced another population wave after World War II, creating another housing crisis. To combat housing shortages and to strengthen zoning laws, the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance and Master Plan for Housing was established in 1946. Due to this ordinance, tract housing increased significantly (Fernandez et al., n.d.). Furthermore, the fear of nuclear weapons amplified after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing, contributing to urban sprawl. Since atomic bombs could destroy urban centers, urban planning advocated for decentralized suburbs connected by highways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

New Urbanism and Theme Park Urbanism will be used to understand how theme parks can be used by city planners to create a more human-centered urban environment. New Urbanism is an urban theory that borrowed a lot from theme park design principles. In contrast, Theme Park Urbanism looks at how urban environments have implemented theme park elements into their planning and design.

New Urbanism

New Urbanism is a movement and theory that hopes to create diverse, sustainable, and walkable neighborhoods. It aims to diversify neighborhoods, design for climate change, and legalize walkable places. However, New Urbanism is a relatively new theory, officially becoming an established philosophy in 1993 when the Congress of New Urbanism (CNU) was created. The CNU enacted a Charter which

outlines New Urbanism's principles for urban planning, organized into three sections, each with nine principles.

The first section of the Charter focuses on the city and the town. It states that cities and towns should have well-defined boundaries and that they should have a mutually beneficial relationship with rural areas (Leccese & McCormick, 1999). The next section centers on the neighborhood, the district and the corridor (Leccese & McCormick, 1999). It states that neighborhoods should be dense, walkable and mixed-use. Notably, neighborhoods should contain various housing types to cater to different income levels, including civic, institutional, and commercial developments. The third section focuses on the block, the street and the building. According to New Urbanism, blocks should prioritize safety, comfort and be visually appealing, in order to encourage community engagement. Irvine, California is an example of a New Urbanist city.

Proponents of New Urbanism argue that it offers economic benefits as well as improves the livability for people. When a city is built based on its principles, walkable and transit-oriented neighborhoods are created, which reduce transportation costs and revitalize cities by creating new jobs. On the other hand, New Urbanism has its critics. Some have argued that New Urbanism promotes similar zoning regulations as Euclidean zoning, except that the buildings are more aesthetically pleasing (DeWolf, 2002). Furthermore, critics point out that retail and mixed-use developments are oftentimes limited and not truly within walking distance of residential areas (DeWolf, 2002). They are also concerned about the potential negative consequences of dense urban centers, where disease can spread more quickly, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Garde, 2020).

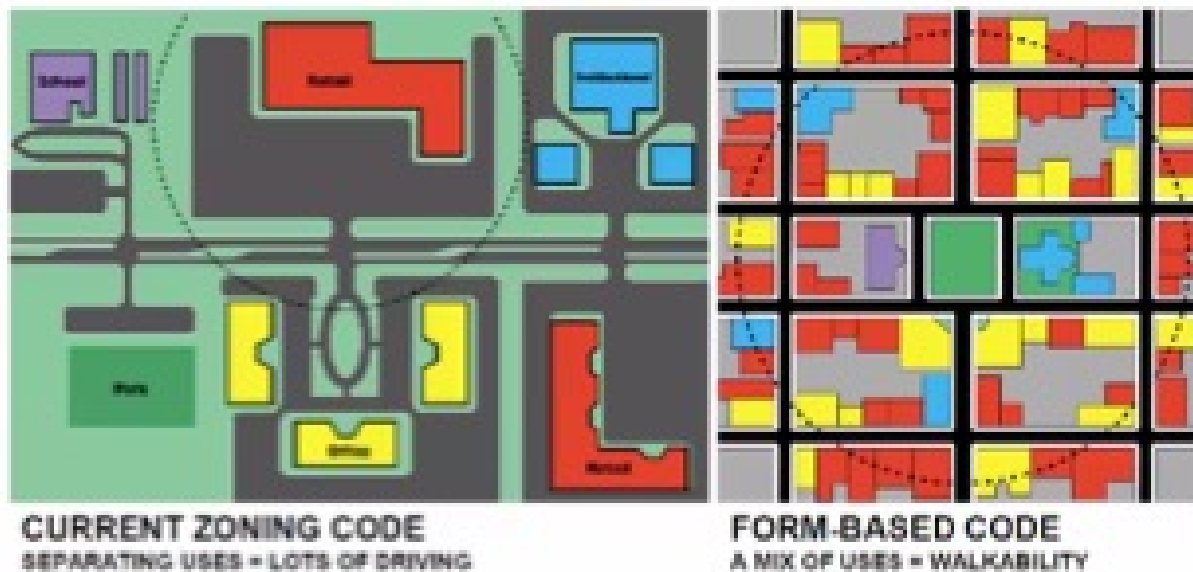
Form-based Codes

The application of New Urbanist principles can be seen in form-based codes (FBC). They were introduced in the late 20th century in an attempt to address some of the issues of Euclidean zoning, such as incohesive urban form and design. Since March 2016, about 0.9% of U.S. cities have adopted form-based codes (Evangelopoulos & Nuworsoo, 2016). Unlike Euclidean zoning, form-based codes look at the physical characteristics of a building, including the site design, circulation area, and how well it fits into the built environment of its neighborhood (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 2013). As such, FBCs allow more natural looking neighborhoods, since it looks at the whole neighborhood when planning. Figure 1 compares Euclidean zoning and form-based codes and shows how they differ, especially how form-based codes implement mix-use planning.

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[A1] Note: A graphic developed for Cleveland's proposed new form-based zoning code illustrates differences with the existing zoning code. The revised form integrates pedestrian traffic with automobile traffic. Adapted from "Cleveland headed this fall toward once-in-a-century shift from traditional zoning to new 'form-based' code" by S. Litt (2023). In public domain

Form-based codes also regulate streets and public spaces, in order to increase the walkability of neighborhoods and land use diversity. Though FBCs have a lot of regulations, they are not as universal when compared to Euclidean zoning. An example of successful implementation of FBCs can be found in Cincinnati, Ohio. Cincinnati divides its city into nine numbered transects, each with varying levels of density and urban development. Transect 3 (T3) Estate is the least dense, which allows for larger plots of single-family homes. On the other hand, Transect 6 (T6) Core is the most dense and therefore includes mixed-use buildings that are higher than four stories (See Figure 2) (City of Cincinnati, 2024, 2024).



Note: T3E and T6C from Cincinnati Land Development Code. Adapted from "Title XVII -Land Development Code - Section 1703-2 specific to transect zones" by City of Cincinnati (2024). In public domain

Furthermore, form-based codes also have economic benefits. As FBCs promote dense and healthy neighborhoods, younger people are more attracted to work in these areas. Thus, it encourages people to come live in these neighborhoods.

Theme Park Urbanism

Theme Park urbanism is a design philosophy that implements the entertainment, aesthetics, and spectacle of a theme park into urban planning. It mainly draws inspiration from the immersive and curated experiences found in theme parks. For example, Disneyland is often cited as a prime model for theme park urbanism (Clavé, 2007). As such, theme park urbanism blends elements of urban planning and theme park design to create spaces that are visually engaging, highly controlled, and designed to create idealized environments for people (Clavé, 2007). Some cities with these design elements in mind are Las Vegas, Nevada and Dubai, UAE.

Theme Park Urbanism is characterized by curated experiences, consumerism and spectacle, control and safety, homogenization and privatization. Under theme park urbanism, the environment is like a theme park in the sense that the urban landscape should be designed with a specific narrative or theme in mind to ensure a sense of cohesion and escape (Clavé, 2007). Furthermore, cities that implement theme park urbanism often emphasize consumption and entertainment, and have a high degree of control over the physical and social parts of the environment.

Critics of theme park urbanism point out that such spaces lack authenticity, are exclusionary, and erode public spaces. They argue that theme park urbanism, when compared to real cities, is devoid of diversity and complexity, making the experience feel superficial and disconnected from real lived experiences of a vibrant urban community (Clavé, 2007). In addition, because these spaces are catered to tourists or more affluent residents, theme park urbanism risks alienating lower income communities, dividing people between those who can afford the experience and those who cannot (Clavé, 2007). Lastly, critics are concerned that the privatization of public spaces will lead to the reduction of true public spaces, in which people of all backgrounds can gather freely (Clavé, 2007).

Theme Park Urbanism in Los Angeles

Theme Park urbanism states that private, mixed-use developments are like theme parks, in the sense that they try to emulate and recreate a healthy urban fabric and social environment, while ignoring their actual context (Mayer, 2016). It is an artificial and "fake" urbanity, and Mayer (2016) argues for actually reforming LA urban planning instead. The fact that Downtown LA is perceived as chaotic, unsafe, and even a dirty place, is not an indictment on cities as a whole. It is not an inherent issue to urban design and high-density environments, it is almost always the effect of broader socioeconomic issues (Mayer, 2016). In the case of LA, it is the high degree of homelessness and the extremely high cost of living.

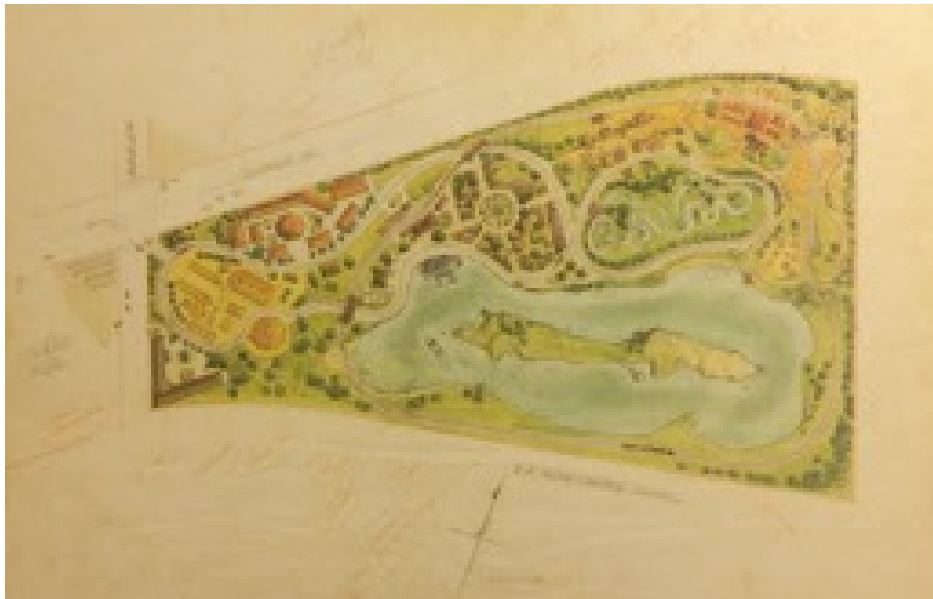
THEME PARK PLANNING ANALYSIS

This section will look at the potential contributions that theme park design thinking can offer to broader city planning, specifically in the context of LA: 1) typologies/layouts, 2) spatial design strategies, 3) infrastructure and mobility.

Theme Park Typologies

Disneyland was the first to implement innovative urban planning into its design. Therefore, many theme parks today tend to follow similar models. A look at the various theme park typologies and their evolutions are explored below:

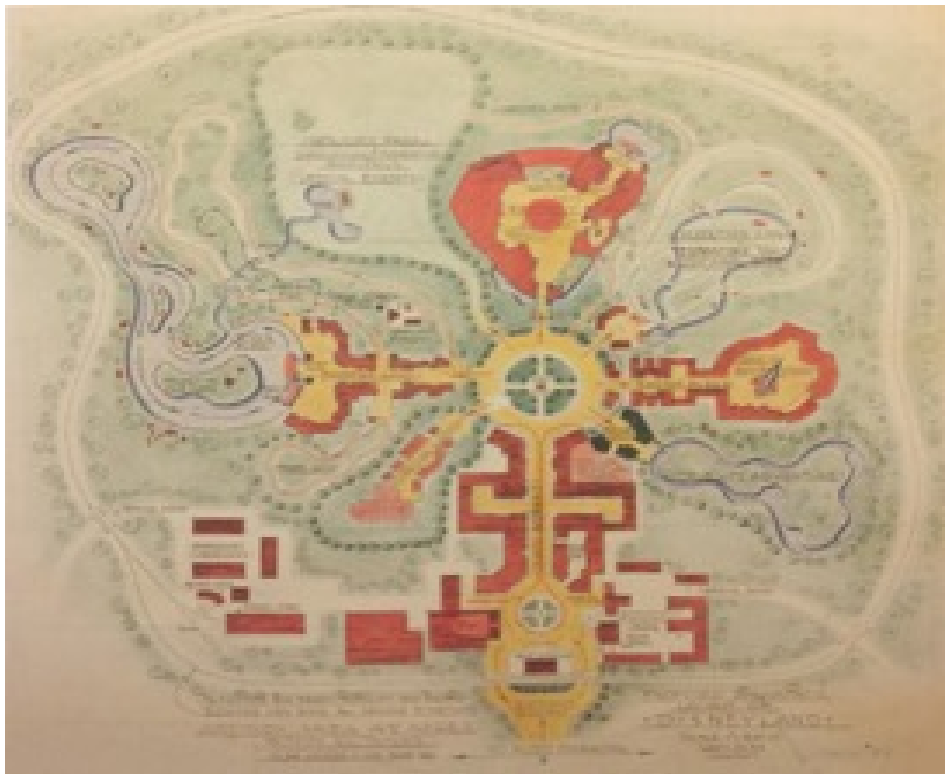
“Picturesque” Theme Park. This is a more natural-looking landscape where visitors stumble upon scenic views and attractions within the park. The plan is hard to navigate as it lacks order, but it is appealing as it feels like an organic park in which visitors naturally stumble from one area to the next. The original concepts, as illustrated in Figure 3, were drawn by Harper Goff, and they look more like small cities with recreational parks and fairgrounds compared to what people consider theme parks today (Imagineerland, 2016a).



Note: The original design of the Disneyland theme park without the formal structure of the final product had a rambling layout. Adapted from “The Theme Park Environment: The Urban Plan” by Imagineerland (2016a). Copyright 2016 by Imagineerland

Hub and spoke. As Disney outgrew the initial design concept, his designers began to conceive other layouts, resulting in the Hub and Spoke (See Figure 4). The layout’s advantages include a primary entrance that also functioned as a retail corridor, a defined central location to facilitate navigation and

thematic transitional areas that provide different perspectives of diverse lands (Imagineerland, 2016a). This strategy can be seen in castle parks, EPCOT's Future World, Animal Kingdom, California, and Adventure (Imagineerland, 2016a).



Note: Disneyland's original hub-and-spoke layout . Adapted from "The Theme Park Environment: The Urban Plan" by Imagineerland (2016a). Copyright 2016 by Imagineerland

Studio/City Style. A more uncommon layout is the studio/city style park as it has some inherent challenges that make it difficult to implement. Since these parks developed organically, they lack a cohesive urban plan, resulting in disjointed areas and confusing layouts (Imagineerland, 2016a). Examples of such parks include parts of Hollywood Studios and Universal Studios Hollywood (See Figure 5) (KHM Travel, n.d.).

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Note: Universal Studios Hollywood's Studio/City Style Layout. Adapted from "Universal Studios Hollywood Map" by KHM Travel (n.d). Copyright by KHM Travel

Expansion Ring. Over time, theme parks need to expand, which can be challenging because the new expansion should not impede on the existing layout. One possible strategy is the expansion ring as it allows for controlled expansion which has been a problem for some parks in the past (Imagineerland, 2016a). A successful example of a park that used the expansion ring is Hong Kong Disneyland (See Image 7) (Imagineerland, 2016a).



Note: Hong Kong Disneyland's expansion ring. Adapted from "Hong Kong Disneyland officially embarking on another major park expansion with pixar & marvel attractions" by S. Ace (2025). Copyright 2025 by WDW News Today.

Theme Park Spatial Design Strategies

Theme parks employ a number of different architectural spatial design strategies that are unique to their experiences. For example, theme parks often create homogeneous styled street facades, in order to transport patrons to another time zone, world, or geography. They also provide specific visual elements that act as visual cues to direct the movement of parkgoers. In architecture, this is called wayfinding, and in theme parks, wayfinding is used to provide a cohesive experience. Another element of spatial design strategies are "weenies", which are structures such as a castle or a tower that act as a focal point for guests to wander deeper into the park (Imagineerland, 2016b). Theme parks also use compression and release of views in order to manipulate sightlines. By narrowing and expanding sightlines, theme parks enhance the sense of discovery and immersion for the visitor.

Theme Park Infrastructure and Logistics

Theme Park infrastructure refers to the "invisible" but crucial infrastructure underlying any successful and effective theme park. They include concealed all loading and offloading zones, hidden from the view of visitors and external parking lot "moat". This creates an inner car-free environment, inevitably more attractive and conducive to pedestrian activities.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Based on the concepts of New Urbanism and Theme Park Urbanism, this research will assess how LA planning should adapt principles from these planning theories and how they will affect the human experience and quality of life of residents and visitors.

The key issues in Los Angeles that this research will preliminarily address are creating walkable and engaging urban centers and corridors, devising a broad urban narrative that designers and architects can aspire to and work towards, such as through form-based codes. It will also address concentrating mobility centers that would enable people to park and then use public transit as a means to commute around the city.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

To reiterate, the research questions are:

1. What can city planners and architects learn from these quasi-urban environments, such as Disneyland, to improve the conditions of the cities they design?
2. What specifically can Los Angeles learn from theme park design, in order to create more engaging and human-centered urban environments?

Case studies from Disneyland and EPCOT are used to answer these questions and examine how the theme park experience can be used to improve people's everyday lives in LA.

PROCEDURE

The first part of this research assesses theme park design and city planning. It compares plans submitted to New Urbanism that implement elements, such as form-based codes to Disneyland and EPCOT parks. It examines the parks' typology, spatial design and infrastructure, comparing them to urban design plans, based on comparative spatial and thematic content analyses. Transformation of theme parks is informed by the consumer society that focuses on certain themes that are human-centered. Theme parks, with this transformation, are searching for fantasy and entertainment.

MATERIALS

A suitable methodology for this study should assess EPCOT and Disneyland theme parks via visitors' views on these parks. Theme parks ought to be assessed using primary data based on decentralized realities of contemporary urbanism and potential they have to the region. In conducting this assessment, the spatial planning of the cultural values of the place that feature theme parks that advance in tandem with the current knowledge should be taken to the center stage. By doing so, as theme parks will help raise the levels of city status, it will also be possible to preserve and endorse local cultural values.

PRELIMINARY SUPPOSITIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research leads with the supposition that theme parks, though distinct from traditional urban environments, offer valuable insights into the design of public urban space. It further presumes that the success of these parks in fostering legibility and place identity stems not from their entertainment offering alone, but from their integrated spatial logic; one that orchestrates movement, visibility, and mixed-use programming in ways many cities struggle to replicate. If these suppositions prove productive, they will advocate for a more narrative-based, human-centered approach to planning.

GOALS AND OUTCOMES

The primary goal is to extract translatable urban design and infrastructural principles from the spatial experiential models of places like EPCOT, and to assess their relevance for cities like Los Angeles grappling with decentralization and experiential disengagement. Another goal is to retain, throughout the research process, a keen awareness of the inextricable differences between a private theme park, and the inherently public and diverse domain that is a city.

Expected outcomes include:

1. A framework of design strategies derived from theme parks that can be adapted to urban settings
2. A critique of Los Angeles' current spatial logic through this comparative framework.
3. A speculative set of urban interventions illustrating how spatial narratives could improve public life in sprawling cities

4. Contributions to the academic discourse on contemporary utopianism in urban design and the future of experiential planning.

RISKS AND CHALLENGES

The risks and challenges include overgeneralization, translation, and access to reliable data. One of the core risks is overgeneralization and understated distinctions, drawing urban design conclusions from environments (theme parks) that are intentionally artificial and unburdened by real-world complexities such as governance, equity, and economic diversity.

Another challenge lies in translation: the direct applicability of strategies from tightly controlled, closed systems to dynamic, open-ended cities is limited. Finally, access to reliable primary data on theme park planning principles may be limited and require archival work, analysis of publicly facing material, or reliance on expert interviews.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This research opens the door for broader interdisciplinary inquiry. Future studies could:

1. Examine how other controlled environments function as micro-urban models
2. Analyze the psychological and behavioral effects of spatial storytelling in urban environments.
3. Conduct empirical research on pedestrian engagement and perception in themed versus traditional urban spaces.

CONCLUSION

This research proposes an interdisciplinary exploration of how the spatial logic, experiential design, and utopian ambitions of American theme parks are relevant sources of successful urban strategies, and how these could inform the future of urban design in sprawling, disengaged cities like Los Angeles. While theme parks are often dismissed, by architects, planners, and policy-makers alike, as artificial or apolitical, they represent some of the most meticulously crafted spatial environments in modern history, capable of fostering legibility, coherence, and human engagement at a level that many real cities struggle to achieve. By comparing the top-down planning structures of these controlled environments to the decentralized realities of contemporary urbanism, this study aims to uncover applicable principles for creating more walkable, emotionally resonant, and socially vibrant cities.

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