



# 13

## Invented places

### J. Sircus

"Minas Tirith was such that it was built on seven levels, and delved into the hill, and about each was set a wall, and in each wall was a gate. But the gates were not set in a line... so that the paved way that climbed towards the Citadel turned first this way and then that across the face of the hill."

"... the floor was paved with stones of many hues; branching runes and strange devices intertwined beneath their feet. They saw now that the pillars were richly carved, gleaming dully with gold and half-seen colours. Many woven cloths were hung upon the walls, and over their wide spaces marched figures of ancient legend..." (*The Lord of the Rings* – J.R.R. Tolkien)

In our minds we climb the curving path, up towards the Citadel of Minas Tirith. In our minds we enter the Great Hall of runes and carved pillars. In our minds these places unfold, step by step, image by image, in a richly portrayed sequence of experiences. Places spawned by the imagination of J.R.R. Tolkien. Invented places.

Invented places spring from the creative minds of author, artist or architect. Often pure fantasy, they are the 'other worlds' of Oz, Star Wars, Dynotopia, and Myst. Yet their inspiration is the world we inhabit. Authors and artists freely borrow from the crafts, technology and architecture of ancient civilisations, recent history, and contemporary society. They blend cultures and imagery creating new, credible visions of place, as in the stories of Jules Verne and George Lucas, the movies *Bladerunner*, or *Dune*, and the architecture of Arcosanti and Las Vegas.

Common to the most successful invented places are 'theme' and 'story'. The theme is the overriding 'big idea' (such as 'The Movies' in Universal Studios' theme park) gluing together the story or stories being told. The theme establishes the context. The story provides the content.

An invented place may be themed as an authentic or symbolic recreation of a past time and place; its

sights and sounds, its colour and texture. For example, the Ancient Rome of the movie *Gladiator*, or Prince Charles's 'Thomas Hardy style' rural town of Poundbury, or a totally magical fantasy like Barry's Never Never Land in *Peter Pan*. While we stay in each story, while we 'suspend disbelief', it all works. When the reader or viewer is jarred by contradiction or distraction, the world falls apart; the place loses credibility, or at best becomes confusing and even chaotic. Successful places stay in one story at a time.

In the real world, Disneyland is the quintessential invented place. It creates reality out of fantasy in ways that are often symbolic and subliminal; digging deep down into the user's psyche, connecting with cross-cultural archetypal images and multi-generational, hard-wired memories. It is successful because it adheres to certain principles of sequential experience and storytelling, creating an appropriate and meaningful sense of place in which both activities and memories are individual and shared. Disneyland provides 'safe' adventures in a 'safe' environment, reaffirming our ability to survive and grow in a world of risks and conflict.

Many interpretations of place might not work for the cultural élite, who demand authenticity, but most places, real or invented, have a pop-culture audience.



And, like novels, real world places must know their audience before the story is written. It's common sense taken to the level of brand marketing. Every place is potentially a brand. In every way as much as Disneyland and Las Vegas, cities like Paris, Edinburgh, and New York are their own brands, because a consistent, clear image has emerged of what each place looks like, feels like, and the story, or history it conveys.

Place has meaning and memories. Place is not passive. Place is not good or bad simply because it's real vs. surrogate, authentic vs. pastiche. People enjoy both, whether it's place created over centuries, or created instantly. A successful place, like a novel or movie, engages us actively in an emotional experience orchestrated and organised to communicate purpose and story.

Story is a strong metaphor for place. It becomes the organising principle and the shared memory. Sometimes the place creates the story, as in Edinburgh, where characters and events have shaped the outcome. Sometimes story is the basis upon which place is created, as in the movies, or at Disneyland. It was no accident that the original creators of Disneyland were art directors and production designers from the Disney Studio, the Imagineers, adept at translating story into place in theatrical and emotionally engaging ways.

Over the years the Imagineers have followed certain principles fundamental to creating a successful place. These principles are concerned with structure and theme (organisation of ideas and people flow), sequence experience (telling of story or purpose), visual communication (details, symbols, and magnets), and participation (through the senses, action, and memory).

The first of these principles is structure and theme. Structure in this context is about planning organisation. It's about flow and Gestalt (memorable pattern). People like simple, logical flowplans. It's easier to follow a sequence of events, easier to orient, and makes people feel more comfortable, more in control. They aren't threatened; they lower their defences and enjoy themselves more. Circuitous sidetracks or dead ends are fine if they're short and consistent with the story. Decision points should be limited. Too much choice creates stress and confusion.

The structure should reflect the 'theme'. A Movie Studio theme will have a grid layout. An Adventure theme will be looping and circuitous. A Discovery theme may be molecular in structure and branching.

In many cultures the 'shape' of a place has additional meaning. For some, the Mandala, or circle, is

a key organising shape, reflecting fundamental spiritual ideologies and primordial truths. It is universally symbolic, representing both the Hero's Journey of leaving and returning home, and the circular nature of life. The circle is a safe, comfortable shape, reinforcing harmony and unity. Disneyland is circular, with a central hub and radiating spokes or paths taking guests on circular, looping journeys into different lands and stories, one at a time.

Circular plans are common in European cities, for practical reasons of defence, surrounding a strong point, or castle, and straddling some natural feature such as a hill or river. Their story reflects a need for protection and reassurance, like a memory of the womb and connection to the umbilical cord. Early Edinburgh had a simple, anthropomorphic Gestalt. The High Street was the spinal cord of the Old Town, connecting the strong head, the Castle, with the rest of the body, branching out to either side with the heart at the Lawnmarket. And, just as Disneyland is organised as distinct, separate stories and lands (Adventureland, Frontierland, etc.), central Edinburgh has a similar structure. On the one side, Holyrood Park and the Old Town, on the other James Craig's Georgian New Town and the port of Leith. Each area of the city is distinctively different in its form, function, and feel. Each has its own, clearly legible story. It's part of what makes Edinburgh a successful place.

The second principle is sequential experience. Experiencing a place is much like following a river ... "which flows, now fast, now slow, now placidly between broad banks ... now halted by a dam, now debauching into an ocean" (Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama*). The experience unfolds emotionally, in a physical sequence.

In moviemaking, storyboarding of sequential images is used linearly to describe a single point of view of action and settings. In a place-making story, sequences are experienced in multiple ways, from different directions and different points of view. There may not be a classic beginning, middle, and end, or plot points. It is interactive story. All the more reason to keep it simple, clear, and consistent.

In a spatial sequence, like a movie, gradual transitions (dissolves), sudden changes (jump cuts), or new perspectives (different point of view), control the narrative. Each creates a different emotional response. In a spatial narrative, elements of the place can be story points. A small tunnel becomes a 'crossing over' or start of something new, like Alice's rabbit hole. A labyrinth or steep stair can represent an ordeal, a rickety bridge or dead end a test, and multiple doors or passageways represent dilemmas

## 128 Urban Design Reader

or choices. There are many such devices, all with associative meanings. Imagine arriving centuries ago at the foot of the Edinburgh High Street, entering under the portcullis arch of the Netherbow gate. The road ahead climbs steeply up through a canyon of tenements, past innumerable archways of wynds and closes, past John Knox's house, beyond the soaring crown of St Giles, beyond the stalls and pens of the Lawnmarket, and on to the powerful embattlements of the Castle, and another gateway. The harsh, unpredictable outer world has been replaced by the fabric of an historic inner world, whose sequential layout reinforces the interdependent relationship and hierarchy of commerce, faith, and politics; a narrative about power and control. Main Street and the Castle at Disneyland have a similar spatial construct, but the narrative is one of harmony and reassurance. The difference is symbolised through the visual communication.

Visual communication is the third key principle. The full meaning or story of a place is only apparent if it can be read; if it's visually legible. Without that legibility the place may be interpreted inappropriately and sometimes not at all. The challenge for invented places is to make the place legible for the audience, by communicating through both subtle and enhanced sights and sounds. It involves the careful use of scale, colour, texture and detail in ways that make the story self-evident and credible. It may be the reproduction of an authentic national pavilion, like Japan, at EPCOT, or an African village in Disney's Animal Kingdom, or interpreting an animated tale like *Snow White* or *Toy Story*. Even when the solution involves 'tricks' of scale-change (to make people feel more comfortable) or forced perspective (inducing exaggerated feelings of awe) or there is a highly theatrical, abstract presentation of façades or landscaping, the creative process and story considerations are the same. Legibility is key.

In older places, the meanings of symbols often change or are forgotten and stories are constantly evolving, or being reinterpreted. The original legibility may be lost on today's audience. Cities move with the times, creating their story in part from the fabric of today. In some cases, new architecture preserves the original narrative, interpreting the past in contemporary ways, or by being a bold statement that adds a new twist to an old story. Too often the outcome is a pointless departure that is out of context or cheaply executed. The shambles of facades and bad signage along Edinburgh's Princes Street is an example of chaos and banality that has almost destroyed the original narrative, a romanticised cornucopia of

Victorian and Edwardian commercial 'palaces'. The nineteenth-century Victoria Street in the Old Town is also a romanticised 'invention', recreating the baronial splendour of Scottish stories in Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels, but it works. Similarly the 'invented' New Town is a complete and consistent story, but is now suffering from forests of parking meters and some poorly scaled window replacements (a different story). Yet in its time it was no more or less a pastiche than Poundbury. It gives the impression of ancient classicism, but without the need to slavishly use ancient technology. The imposing neo-classical street facades are strictly two-dimensional, like a stage set. The back sides are a cheaper, more functional vernacular. It's about impressions, not substance. It's been that way in every revival period. A need to engage the present with memories and meanings anchored in readable images of the past.

Another key place-making and visual communication necessity is the visually compelling focal element, or 'emotional magnet'. It's what Walt Disney irreverently called a 'wienie'. It may be an isolated tower, or a castle, or some interesting event. It keeps people moving; enticing them through spaces to a specific destination point. A wienie is more than simply a landmark, because it embodies meaning and elicits an emotional response and an action. In Disneyland, each Land, each story, has at least one major wienie and often several subordinate ones. They are often visible from within another Land, beckoning, and reminding that another story and place await.

European cities like Edinburgh are full of 'wienies'. The spires and domes of churches and banks, and the towers and battlements of castles, all act to move people through a city. They provide orientation markers and goals, over and beyond their original significance as symbols of power. Invented places need similar markers and emotional magnets.

Successful places can be either rich on detail and authentic, or boldly abstracted and theatric, providing they have clear visual communication that is easily understood and is congruent with the story. The uninteresting, banal places do not communicate and in that respect are simply pastiches.

There is, however, a balance that needs to be struck between providing a rich, meaningful experience that can be re-visited and new discoveries made, and one that creates informational overload. The presentation and access to the experience needs its own hierarchy, allowing people to make their own choices about how deep and how broad they want to go. It helps make the experience less risky, more controllable, and more enjoyable.

Participation in a story usually takes place via characters and action. They are the connecting link that allows us to identify with our own world and experiences. On one level, the buildings themselves can be considered characters, whose very juxtaposition can create harmony or conflict. But a more literal interpretation depends on the living characters that inhabit these places, without whom the place is but a shell. Historic places are rife with characters of infamy and legend, remembered by prose, song, and art. What would Edinburgh be without its 'Old Town' stories of Burke and Hare, Deacon Brodie, or Greyfriars Bobby, or the 'New Town' memories of Lister, Simpson and Conan Doyle? These 'sons of Reekie', and the many others immortalised by story and statue throughout the city, provide a kind of 'streetmosphere' in much the same way as the walk-around storybook characters of a theme park. They awake memories, often related to childhood, and early fantasies. They make the stories accessible.

In story places, people also participate through sound and smell as well as sight. These other senses are extremely potent stimuli of memory. If any sensory input is inconsistent the place suffers. Imagine Disneyland smelling of fish and the music being techno-rap. It just doesn't work. This kind of participation can be the difference between success and failure. At Disneyland and in Las Vegas the music is as carefully choreographed as the flow of spaces. Music is there to provide the right ambience and emotional emphasis at just the right moment and place, in the same way as a movie score. The occasional fiddler and bagpiper on the Royal Mile 'though often annoying to locals, achieves the appropriate result for Edinburgh's tourists.

In summary, all places are to some degree invented, but the successful ones are characterised by planning, building design and programme that is clearly integrated with story. Story makes places more meaningful and more accessible. Story is both an individual and a shared experience. It's what connects us as human beings and defines our cultures. Like places, story may come about over time, or may arise instantaneously. It doesn't matter which, providing the particular story and place are consistent and immersive.

It doesn't mean the whole world should be a theme park. But there are lessons to be learnt from these experientially successful, cross-cultural, operationally intense places. Derived from a lineage including fairs, expos, museums and heritage-sites and the places of fictional story, themepark design is part art, part science. Theme parks have influenced a host of places in the urban environment, like Las Vegas, and innumerable retail entertainment centres around the world. The theme park epitomises the 'invented place', but it does so with a nod to some of the great places of history; places like Edinburgh, the 'Athens of the North', 'Auld Reekie'.

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