

John Hannigan

FANTASY CITY

Pleasure and profit in the
postmodern metropolis



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FANTASY CITY

American cities have reinvented themselves, devastated by the impact of deindustrialization and government cutbacks. In *Fantasy City*, John Hannigan describes how cities have now come to represent themed fantasy experiences; the piers, factories and warehouses of the past have been replaced by the casinos, megaplex cinemas and themed restaurants. *Fantasy City* offers the first comprehensive account of how this new form of urban development has emerged and intensified and asks whether such areas of fantasy end up destroying communities or create new groupings of shared identities and experiences.

By offering provocative insights into urban development and by drawing on extensive material taken from a wide range of sources, John Hannigan has written the first comprehensive account of this new form of urban development. *Fantasy City* will therefore be essential reading for urban sociologists and students in geography, cultural studies and current affairs.

John Hannigan is Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *Environmental Sociology* also published by Routledge.

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metropolis

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London and New York

First published 1998
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

Reprinted 1999, 2000

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Hannigan John.

Fantasy city: pleasure and profit in the postmodern metropolis/John Hannigan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Cities and towns—United States. 2. City and town life—United States. 3. Sociology, Urban—United States. I. Title.

HT123.H337 1998

307.76'0973—dc21 98—23774

CIP

ISBN 0-203-98462-5 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-415-15097-3 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-15098-1 (pbk)

FOR RUTH, OLIVIA, MAEVE, TIM AND T.J.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Anyone who writes a book entirely about urban entertainment is assumed to be either a dedicated fan or an implacable ideological enemy. Alas, I fall into neither camp. Although I don't claim to be an amusement park aficionado, I fondly recall my experience as a child riding the giant roller coaster at Crystal Beach, at the time the longest wooden structure of its type in the world. I don't dream of attending fantasy baseball camps in Florida, yet I still take my glove to games at the Skydome and can boast of having seen batting legend Harmon Killebrew play as a Washington Senator (several times). I've never been to a Rolling Stones concert but I've seen Tom Jones perform at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. What I will confess to, however, is a lifelong fascination with cities—their architecture, rhythms and subcultures. While I cannot claim to have worn out as many pairs of shoes as the 1920s pioneering urban sociologist Robert Park, I've nevertheless spent many hours exploring cities and their attractions around the world. And, as a veteran city-watcher, I am intrigued by the question of whether the themed entertainment destinations which I discuss in *Fantasy City* will create a new sense of urban vibrancy and vitality or, alternatively, will instill a safer, but duller version of metropolitan life.

Fantasy City began as a 1995 "Trend Report" in the journal *Current Sociology* on the nature of the postmodern city. My thanks to the editor Bob Brym for encouraging me to delve into this body of research. Kudos should also go to my editor at Routledge, Mari Shullaw, who gave the go-ahead for this project, so totally different from my previous book on the social construction of environmental problems. Although we had never met prior to my completing the first draft, Sharon Zukin nevertheless provided great encouragement for polishing the final manuscript of *Fantasy City*, through her written comments and her enthusiasm for the topic, conveyed over a lunch in Toronto's Eaton Center in August 1997. I would also like to thank Jeff McNair and Steve Rhys of Forrec Ltd. who gave up several hours from their hectic schedules to help me sort out hype from reality in the themed entertainment business. Of course, I am solely responsible for the specific interpretations to be found in this book.

Finally, as with my first book, my family helped immensely. Tim, our resident computer ace and pop guru, provided numerous free services from setting up the text and tables on the Mac to scanning in the boxed inserts. My multi-talented

wife, Ruth, took many of the accompanying photographs and performed miracles as the photo editor on the other pictures. Her fascination with marketing in the entertainment business has been infectious and has led to many interesting and worthwhile discussions. The weekly arrival of the trade paper *Amusement Business* is always an event in our house. Thanks also to Maeve, Olivia and T.J. for their assurances that Dad was doing something “neat.”

ABBREVIATIONS

APA	American Planning Association
AWZA	American Wilderness Zoo & Aquarium
BID	Business Improvement District
DDC	Disney Development Company
FEC	Family Entertainment Centre
IPO	Initial public offering
LBE	Location based entertainment
LBO	Leveraged buyout
MLB	Major League Baseball
NBA	National Basketball Association
NFL	National Football League
REIT	Real estate investment trust
RFP	Request for Proposals
SMSA	Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area
SFRA	San Francisco Redevelopment Agency
TEA	Themed Entertainment Association
TIF	Tax increment financing
UEC	Urban entertainment center
UED	Urban entertainment destination
ULI	Urban Land Institute
WEM	West Edmonton Mall

CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS

- 1933 The first drive-in movie theater opens in Camden, New Jersey.
- 1955 Disneyland opens in Anaheim, California.
- 1958 The Dodgers team move from Brooklyn, New York to Los Angeles.
- 1961 The Six Flags Over Texas theme park opens, the first one in the Six Flags chain.
- 1964 Freedomland USA theme park is unsuccessful.
- 1965 The State of Nevada allows the corporate ownership of gambling casinos.
- 1971 Peter Morton and Isaac Tigrett launch the Hard Rock Cafe in London, Great Britain.
- 1971 The Magic Kingdom, the first phase of Disney World, opens near Orlando, Florida.
- 1975 The Detroit Lions leave the downtown Tiger Stadium for the suburban Pontiac Silverdome.
- 1976 The State of New Jersey licenses Atlantic City as a gaming center.
- 1981 Faneuil Hall opens in Boston, which begins the start of the festival market place phenomenon.
- 1982 The Hard Rock Cafe chain arrives in the US, with the opening of its first Los Angeles restaurant.
- 1982 EPCOT opens in Florida
- 1985 The West Edmonton Mall is completed. It is the first shopping center of its kind to combine shopping and entertainment to a significant degree.
- 1989 Disney-MGM Studios opens in Florida.
- 1991 In New York, Robert Earl opens the first Planet Hollywood theme restaurant.

- 1991 The *Diamond Queen* is launched on the Mississippi River in Iowa. America's first modern-day riverboat casino, it initiates the start of legalized riverboat gambling in the US.
- 1992 Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore, Maryland is completed. This is the first of the neo-traditional ballparks located in American central city sites.
- 1993 Universal City Walk opens in California.
- 1994 Seagram buys MCA for \$5.7 billion.
- 1995 Disney purchases Capital Cities/ABC for \$19 billion. The age of "synergies" is now in full swing.
- 1995 The 104-year-old Elitch Gardens opens its season at a new site in lower downtown Denver, the only US amusement park so far to relocate to a downtown site.
- 1996 NikeTown opens in Manhattan, launching a new chapter in retail theater.
- 1997 Disney opens the refurbished New Amsterdam Theater on 42nd Street in New York—the cornerstone of the much heralded 42nd Street Development Project.
- 1997 Ogden opens its first American Wilderness Experience at Ontario Mills Mall, forty miles east of Los Angeles, becoming the first of a new generation of simulated nature attractions in exurban shopping centers.

INTRODUCTION

On a bitterly cold winter's night in March 1997, thousands of local Toronto people turned out to celebrate the opening of the city's Planet Hollywood restaurant. At a closed-off intersection at the base of the CN Tower, a makeshift stage was erected, flanked by a set of giant speakers. After dark, Hollywood star Bruce Willis, accompanied by fellow celebrity investors Demi Moore and Sylvester Stallone, took to the stage where he and his rock band, The Accelerators, performed a brief set before retiring inside the restaurant to an inaugural party whose guests included actors Luke Perry and Tom Arnold, blues musician Jeff Healy and a sprinkling of players from the Toronto Raptors basketball team. By nine o'clock the street was quiet and the crowd had begun to wander off. The event lived on, however, in the prominent coverage it received in the local media over the next day, and again when rumors (unfounded) of a marital split between Willis and Moore briefly surfaced. Two weeks later with an estimated 15,000 fans in attendance, Willis and Arnold again, together with celebrity shareholder Arnold Schwarzenegger, movie stars Will Smith and Samuel L. Jackson, and rock musician Jon Bon Jovi, popped up in Vancouver to launch yet another Planet Hollywood restaurant. "We are bringing memorabilia from warehouses in Hollywood, the authentic stuff", Schwarzenegger said. "And we bring an incredible amount of celebrities" ("Stars draw throng" 1997).

The Planet Hollywood openings are part of a "new phase of entertaining consumption" (Warren 1993:174) which is sweeping across urban landscapes worldwide. In its wake it is depositing an infrastructure of casinos, megaplex cinemas, themed restaurants, simulation theaters, interactive theme rides and virtual reality arcades which collectively promise to change the face of leisure in the postmodern metropolis. So far, we've only glimpsed the leading edge of this emerging "Fantasy City" but there is every indication that by the next millennium this will have become a global trend. In the late 1990s, nearly every major multinational entertainment company has established a development team to evaluate, plan and initiate urban entertainment destination (UED) projects. At least a dozen of the key real estate developers in North America have indicated that they will introduce projects which will feature significant entertainment components, either as a retail anchor or as a stand alone venue (Beyard and Rubin 1995:6). In the near future, major entertainment complexes are set to

open on 42nd Street in New York, at Metreon in San Francisco, and on the site of a retired military base in Toronto. Stricter planning laws, more active city centers and less competitive retail markets have all contributed to a somewhat slower pace of UED development in Europe, but a trio of first generation projects—Centro in Oberhausen, Germany; Port Vell along the harbor in Barcelona, Spain; and Kinopolis in Brussels, Belgium—are on a comparable scale to their American cousins (Robinett and Camp 1997). The Asia-Pacific region is a major growth area for themed entertainment projects (see [Chapter 9](#)) as a pent-up demand for retail, entertainment and recreational activities fuels the construction of scores of theme parks, water parks and malls. China, for example, has embraced this new phenomenon with forty-one theme parks having opened over the last decade and many more planned, including one scheduled for a northern suburb of Beijing which promises, somewhat ominously, to simulate the blast of the nuclear bomb which destroyed Hiroshima (“Asians at play” 1996:48–9).

These developments are indicative of a new urban economy which has its roots in tourism, sports, culture and entertainment. In what may be a sign of things to come, a 1995 report by a business forecasting group at the University of California, Los Angeles, announced that for the first time the number of jobs in entertainment industries in the State of California surpassed those in the aerospace industry. In the Los Angeles area alone it is estimated that there are more than 4,400 firms who make their living out of the film business and 100,000 freelancers employed in the industry (“A busted flush” 1997:26). Tourism remains a strong force in the local economy, producing an annual revenue of \$7.2 billion; making it second only to business and management services as the LA region’s largest industrial sector (Molotch 1996:240). Next door in the State of Nevada, Las Vegas, the once and future entertainment capital of America, is booming. Between the years 1989–1999 it will have welcomed \$16 billion worth of investments in entertainment related mega-projects. Taking its cue from these larger entertainment capitals, municipalities across Canada and the US have attempted to bolster local economies which have lost their manufacturing base by undertaking new development which blends sports, entertainment and retail. In Trenton, New Jersey’s Roebling redevelopment area, formerly the site of a collection of aging steel and wire factories, a \$45 million arena is to be built forming part of a triangle of new construction which includes: Waterfront Park, a minor-league baseball stadium; a \$44 million hotel and conference center; and a renovated Trenton War memorial. “For Trenton to advance,” Mercer County executive Robert D. Prannetti observed, “we had to find a niche in modern economic times...and the leisure-spending industry is probably among the fastest growing in an area in which older cities like this can be competitive” (Gabarine 1997).

Defining features

Fantasy City is bounded and defined by six central features. First, it is *theme-oriented*, by which I mean that everything from individual entertainment venues to

the image of the city itself conforms to a scripted theme, normally drawn from sports, history or popular entertainment. Sometimes, a single theme is used, for example, based around a blockbuster movie, a cartoon character or a country-music star. While at other times, "theme enhancement" is employed in which an ambience is created around a distinctive geographic locale, historical period or type of cultural activity. Within large-scale projects "multi-theming" is implemented in which the site is divided into a series of zones, each with its own thematic focus (Rubin *et al.* 1994:64). Such theming is "singularly blind to context" (Adler 1995:70), especially with relation to the surrounding neighborhood. While developers make some effort to tie the different elements of their projects together under an umbrella of motifs such as "old town" or "seaside," in fact, each restaurant, theater or shop is internally themed according to a standard formula which is "rolled out" across the globe.

Second, not only is Fantasy City themed but it is also aggressively *branded*. Urban entertainment destinations are not financed and marketed exclusively on the basis of their ability to deliver a high degree of consumer satisfaction and fun but also on their potential for selling licensed merchandise on site. Sometimes branded identities derive from the success of a location based entertainment (LBE) project, but in other instances they represent the imposition of pre-existing consumer and show business brands (such as Nike, Universal, Coca-Cola, ViaCom) on leisure sites in the expectation of creating a profitable "synergy." Another option is the rising popularity of "naming rights"; the sale of corporate names for sports stadiums and arenas and concert halls. While such public places as Grand Central Station or Piccadilly Circus are not up for grabs just yet, a kind of precedent was set recently when Continental Airlines became the first national corporate sponsor of New York's theater district, soon to be rechristened "Continental World" ("Coffee, tea or Broadway" 1997). Indeed, one indicator of the rapidly institutionalizing linkage between branding and UEDs may be seen in plans by the Themed Entertainment Association's Northeast Chapter to offer a fourteen week course through New York University's Stern School of Business titled, "Expanding Your Brand Through Location-Based Venues."

Third, Fantasy City operates *day and night*, in the same spirit as the Nevada casinos. This reflects its intended market of "baby boomer" and "Generation X" adults in search of leisure, sociability and entertainment. In marked contrast to the traditional suburban shopping mall which shuts down by nine or ten o'clock at night, the developers of urban entertainment centers (UECs) actively encourage after-dark activities which range from themed night clubs (Billboard Live, Dave & Busters) to late-night entertainment "destinations" in tourist areas such as south Florida (Church Street Station, Coco Walk, Disney's Pleasure Island).

Fourth, Fantasy City is *modular*, mixing and matching an increasingly standard array of components in various configurations. Typically, an UED project will contain one or more themed restaurants (the Hard Rock Cafe, Planet Hollywood, the Rainforest Cafe), a megaplex cinema, an IMAX theater, record (HMV, Virgin, Tower) and book (Barnes & Noble, Borders) megastores, and

some form of interactive, high-tech arcade complete with virtual reality games and ride simulators. Large, publicly sponsored projects might also include an aquarium, sport stadium and/or arena, live theater and a science museum. Paradoxically, the more cities seek to differentiate themselves on the basis of distinctive fantasy themes, the more they resemble one another with the same line-up of attractions.

Fifth, Fantasy City is *solipsistic*; isolated from surrounding neighborhoods physically, economically and culturally. As such, it is the epitome of what Christine Boyer (1993) has termed the “city of illusion”—a metropolis which ignores the reality of homelessness, unemployment, social injustice and crime, while eagerly transforming sites and channels of public expression into “promotional spaces.” Despite some concessions towards minority hiring, job training and investment, too many UED projects stand apart from their neighbors. In this respect they emulate the experience of Atlantic City, where the glittering strip of casino-hotels along the Boardwalk stand in stark juxtaposition to a declining local community.

Finally, Fantasy City arguably is *postmodern* inasmuch as it is constructed around technologies of simulation, virtual reality and the thrill of the spectacle. Without a doubt, a major inspiration has been the Disney model, not just because it has been widely imitated but also because a number of the Disney “imagineers” (designers) have migrated to other entertainment and real estate companies and projects where they bring their “Magic Kingdom” sensibility. Increasingly, as motion picture and amusement park technologies merge to produce a new generation of attractions, the space between authenticity and illusion recedes, creating the condition of “hyperreality” described by such postmodern writers as Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard. Furthermore, Fantasy City is postmodern insofar as it represents a “collage” (Dear 1995:30) or “gigantic agglomeration” (Soja 1989:246) of themed attractions, more closely connected to global commerce than to one another.

Two views

The advent of Fantasy City has not been without controversy. Proponents, largely located within the development and entertainment industries, see this as a key urban growth area of the future. One major promoter has been the Urban Land Institute (ULI), an education, research and lobbying organization which serves the real estate sector. Since March 1995, the ULI has sponsored an unprecedented four professional seminars dealing with the topic of developing UEDs, all of which have been oversubscribed, with attendance from both Canada and the US and abroad. In the fall of 1996, ULI launched *The E Zone*, a monthly newsletter for members which specializes in news about pending urban entertainment projects. Themed entertainment has been the subject of several workshops and sessions at the conventions of the International Council of Shopping Centers and was spotlighted at a three-day professional workshop co-

produced by the Themed Entertainment Association (TEA) and the publishers of *TCI* (Theatre Crafts International) and *Lighting Dimensions* magazines. At the 1997 TiLE (Trends in Leisure and Entertainment) conference and trade show in Strasbourg, France, topics for discussion included “Urban Entertainment Real Estate”; “Theming in Entertainment and Dining”; and “Planetariums and Edutainment.”

Also supportive are a number of local politicians, planners and economic development officers who view UEDs as the key to continued urban growth. Reacting to a just announced C\$2 billion development plan for a downtown site adjacent to the CN Tower which contains a significant entertainment component, Toronto mayor Barbara Hall endorsed the development as “an important part of the next century of this city” (Wong 1997). Similarly, Jimmie Sacco, general manager of Pittsburgh’s Three Rivers Stadium, greeted news of a proposed \$1.5 billion sports/entertainment/retail/industrial renaissance plan targeted for both the downtown area and for its outlying counties, with the observation: “For this project to be approved would show that Pittsburgh is moving forward into the next century” (Waddell 1997:13). In 1996, the New York Metro Chapter of the American Planning Association (APA) gave its top award to officials and civic groups who had backed the \$1.7 billion Times Square Redevelopment Project. This “Miracle on 42nd Street,” as *TIME* magazine (Handy 1997) described it, includes renovations of the New Amsterdam and New Victory theaters as well as the requisite mix of themed restaurants, record and video superstores and virtual reality arcades.

Not every one, however, is as impressed as the APA. Opposition to the themed metropolis has come from academics, neighborhood activists and writers, all of whom decry the elitism and architectural phoniness of these new “landscapes of leisure.” These views are epitomized in published volleys by two well-known American architectural critics, Ada Louise Huxtable and Paul Goldberger.

In her book *The Unreal America*,¹ based on a lecture she gave to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Huxtable (1997a) launches a jeremiad against the architecture of Fantasy City on the grounds that it celebrates the fake over the real, thereby elevating surrogate experience and synthetic settings to a position of primacy. In Texas, for example, a movie-set Alamo has joined the genuine article as a popular tourist site, even outstripping the original because it is larger and more noticeable. On an extended tour through Ellis Island, once the gateway in New York’s harbor for new immigrants to America, Huxtable finds a huge disparity between the empty and decaying rooms in the unrestored buildings, which summon up ghosts of past inmates, and the restored portions with their clichéd commercial displays which evoke “something else” unconnected to a concern for the past. In today’s fractured and deeply troubled society, she observes, we discard the harsh truths of history in favor of something which reassures and entertains (1997a:31). This intrusion of commercialism into history results in a “hollow history” in which the surrogate version usually appears as little more than a “reduced and emptied-out idea.”

In a contribution to an edited volume in honor of former New York mayor Robert Wagner, Paul Goldberger (1996) takes a different line of argument. Disneyfied landscapes such as South Street Seaport in New York or City Walk in Universal City, California, represent what he terms “urbanoid environments”—sealed-off private environments purporting to be public places. As such, they contribute to the rise of the “private city” in which the disorganized reality of older streets and cities is replaced by a measured, controlled and organized kind of urban experience which is intimately linked to a fusion of consumerism, entertainment and popular culture. Such quasi-urban environments, he maintains, seek to provide all the energy, variety, visual stimulation and cultural opportunities of the real thing, while, at the same time, shutting out the problems that have come to accompany urban life, notably poverty and crime. In doing so, the new developments end up discouraging the mixing of different classes of people in order to make the city safe for the middle class. Goldberger laments this strategy, observing that it blurs the lines between city and suburb, with the former taking on certain characteristics more associated with the latter. Here, he drifts back towards Huxtable’s thesis, maintaining that real cities are preferable to their urbanoid clones because they are more “authentic,” by which he means that they possess elements of roughness, serendipity and creativity which are missing in the Disney-style version.

Huxtable and Goldberger do not categorically condemn everything to be found in Fantasy City. At the same time as Huxtable excoriates surrogate experience and synthetic settings, she praises the architecture of Las Vegas where she believes the “real fake” has been developed into an art form:

Continuous, competitive frontages of moving light and color and constantly accelerating novelty lead to the gaming tables and hotels. The purpose is clear and the solution is dazzling; the result is completely and sublimely itself. The outrageously fake has developed its own indigenous style and life style to become a real place. This is an urban design frontier where extraordinary things are happening.

(1997b:40)

Similarly, Goldberger distinguishes between Disney, the company, which “has done so much to devalue authenticity in the new urban paradigm” and Disney’s restoration of the New Amsterdam Theater in New York which is “really quite un-Disneyesque.” “As the New Amsterdam is restored,” he observes, “this will not be the invention of a make-believe past; it will be the reinvigoration of a very real one. This is the kind of remake of an urban icon that more cities need” (1996:144).

Still, by and large both Huxtable and Goldberger remain pessimistic about the future of the theme park city, viewing it as a failed attempt to create a genuine urban form comparable to the great cities of the past.

The outline for *Fantasy City*

Over the following chapters, I will argue that Fantasy City is the end-product of a long-standing cultural contradiction in American society between the middle-class desire for experience and their parallel reluctance to take risks, especially those which involve contact with the “lower orders” in cities. The “merchants of leisure” who have piloted the urban entertainment industry since the late nineteenth century recognized this paradox early on and deliberately designed activities, venues and technologies which could be counted on to both dazzle and reassure. From time to time, however, they have lost their way, either running out of star dust or failing to adequately insulate their customers from the realities of the surrounding city. At these junctures, a succession of visionary entrepreneurs—Walt Disney, James Rouse, Steve Wynn—have emerged who have re-established the winning formula and put urban entertainment back on the map.

With the current rise of “urbanoid environments,” to use Goldberger’s term, a major initiative is once again underway to convert American downtown areas into glittering, protected playgrounds for middle-class consumers. Exciting as this promises to be, the meteor-like spread of urban entertainment centers, designer sports stadiums and gargantuan casino hotels inevitably raises a number of significant issues for the future growth of the postmodern metropolis. Are fantasy cities the culmination of a long-term trend in which private space replaces public space? Do these new entertainment venues further entrench the gap between the haves and have-nots in the “dual city”? Are they the nuclei around which new downtown identities form or do they simply accelerate the destruction of local vernaculars and communities? And, finally, do they constitute thriving urban cauldrons out of which flows the elixir to reverse the decline of downtown areas or are they danger signs that the city itself is rapidly being transformed into a hyperreal consumer commodity? Together, these questions invoke four domains of moral meaning: polity, equity, authenticity and civility.

While for a long time urban historians have noted the “private” character of the American city (Warner 1968), it is feared that this attribute will be further exaggerated with the growth of Fantasy City. As I outline in [Chapter 7](#), the majority of large-scale UED initiatives are created by public redevelopment agencies in joint business with private partners from the real estate and entertainment industries. If we look to past experience, we can expect the private sector to dominate this relationship, thereby imprinting the themed environment with its attributes of exclusion, competition and commodity-led relationships (Fainstein 1994:225–6). Ominously, in its first and most extensive foray into urban planning on non-company property, Disney consultants proposed (unsuccessfully) a redesign for the civic center in Seattle which would have made an admission fee inevitable (Warren 1994). While most public-private partnerships are unlikely to go so far as to charge taxpayers a fee to enter a city hall, none the less, it is important to consider how the boom in urban

entertainment could sway the balance between public and private space in the future city.

Second, we must be prepared to judge how equitable these new themed developments are likely to be, both in terms of the audience they serve and with respect to the surrounding community. If these leisure sites are nothing more than high-tech playgrounds for tourists and suburban day-trippers, and have no discernible economic effect on the neighborhoods in which they are situated, then it can be argued that their benefits need to be re-evaluated, particularly from the perspective of public policy. "For whom are we saving the cities?" asks urban sociologist Gregory Squires (1989:9); this is a fair question, especially since the festival market places, new sports arenas and stadiums, casinos, museums and aquariums and other similar projects are usually framed within the context of inner-city revitalization and underwritten by public subsidies.

Third, we need to grapple with the charge that these new themed entertainment projects are bogus because they are "inauthentic." At first glance, this seems to be purely an aesthetic issue, as much about taste as about anything else. The proliferation of simulated environments, from an Irish pub to a New York neighborhood, may strike some observers as *déclassé*—like plastic pink flamingoes or velvet paintings of Elvis—but this is not legitimate grounds for rejection. Similarly, the premise that the "authentic" can only be located within working-class job settings (steel mills, working ports), housing (cottages, tenements) or cultural activities (bingo, bowling, bars), whereas the rest is an example of "false consciousness," is a romantic notion (Fainstein 1994:231–2). Still, this concern about authenticity is not without some grounds. As Susan Davis (1997) has demonstrated, the simulation of nature found at Sea World in San Diego is neither entirely accurate, nor is it completely lacking in ideological baggage. Instead, it's a carefully crafted version of the marine world which is meant both to humanize dolphins and other sea creatures and to make concern for them a badge of bourgeois status. With a new generation of nature-themed attractions about to appear (Ogden's American Wilderness Zoo & Aquarium at exurban super-malls in California, Arizona and Texas; Disney's Wilderness Lodge in Florida), it is important to assess how and with what intent the natural environment is depicted within these theme parks, as well as considering the social implications. Similarly, Goldberger's concern over "urbanoid environments" such as Universal's CityWalk is valid inasmuch as these quasi-places have the capacity to replace real streets and to preclude civic action wishing to keep community spaces alive.

Finally, we should consider the issue of whether current entertainment developments represent an existing new form of urban renewal or whether they are simply a case of cynical hucksterism. Once again, it is important here to separate matters out from the issue of "good taste." It is easy to equate civility with a certain lifestyle. In Celebration, Disney's recently opened new town in Florida, urbanity is defined as being able to walk downtown for a coffee cooler at *Barnie's* (Pollan 1997:62) as opposed to having to drive to the mall for a surf 'n'

turf dinner. While there's a lot to be said for a neighborhood which offers specialty coffee, cool jazz and the Sunday *New York Times*, in essence a vibrant urban experience constitutes more than this. Above all, an urban lifestyle is about choice and opportunity. In the lakeside neighborhood where I live with my family, coffee aficionados can patronize upmarket chains such as Starbucks, Second Cup and Timothy's; however, they can also hang out at the Roastery, whose proprietor has been known to show up at 6 a.m. with free thermoses of coffee for parents waiting in a queue to enroll their children in swimming lessons, or at Ritter's, whose walls display the work of local artists. It is important to consider whether the high-rent environs of Fantasy City can accommodate this type of variety and choice, or if the relentless drive for brand superiority, extension and "roll out" which characterizes theme park cities will impose a uniformity in which local initiative and identity is stifled.

I wish to begin with a retrospective look at the "golden age" of urban entertainment which shone brightly for three decades from 1895 to 1925. Some commentators have seen in this period the "unmediated experience of urbanity" (Goss 1996:222) which has since disappeared, despite recent attempts to revive it. Dazzling as it must have been, nevertheless I maintain that it was not quite what it seemed. Deliberately constructed by a small cast of leisure merchants, the commercial culture which encompassed amusement parks, vaudeville halls, nightclubs, baseball stadiums, movie palaces and other leisure venues was, in fact, carefully regulated so as to reconcile the competing currents of democratic access and class control. In particular, I identify two key social constructions favored by the entertainment entrepreneurs of the time: "democracy's theater" and "the good-natured crowd" which together acted to create a public culture which appeared to be original, affordable and universal, even if it was not entirely any of these things.

By the 1950s, the neon lights had gone out and downtown areas were dying. In [Chapter 2](#) I trace the decline of public entertainment during this period and its implications for downtown vitality and urban sociability. A quarter of a century later, urban entertainment made a remarkable, if not complete return, conveying the message that "Cities are fun." In [Chapter 3](#) I document this come-back, starting in the 1970s with the building of downtown malls and festival market places and picking up steam in the 1990s with the boom in themed restaurants, special format theaters, virtual reality arcades, sports-entertainment complexes, gambling casinos and other components which make up Fantasy City.

What is the appeal of Fantasy City to postmodern consumers? In [Chapter 4](#) I suggest four possibilities: the siren song of seductive technology; a new source of "cultural capital"; a prime provider of experiences which satisfy our desire for "riskless risks"; and a form of "affective ambience." I conclude by considering the implications of the emerging theme park city for the invention and testing of new identities and lifestyles, notably those related to gender and sexuality.

How should we account for the rise of Fantasy City in the final decade of the twentieth century? In [Chapter 5](#) I attribute this to the convergence of three major

corporate trends in the 1990s: the increasing dominance of rational techniques of production (the “McDonaldization” of the market place), the proliferation of themed environments, and the elevation of “synergies” as a key logic in the entertainment and development industries. This has given rise to a further convergence of four consumer activity systems—shopping, entertainment, dining, and education and culture—producing three new hybrids: shopertainment, eatertainment and edutainment.

Who is behind these new landscapes of pleasure? In [Chapter 6](#) I profile the emerging nexus between a brace of large-scale real estate developers, many of whom are survivors of the economic downturn of the early 1990s, and the world’s most influential entertainment companies: Disney, Universal, Sony, Warner Bros., Sega. In particular, I outline the risk factors which constrain each of the four major private players (corporate financiers, real estate developers, entertainment companies, retail/entertainment operators) involved in building Fantasy City and the strategies which they employ in order to manage these risks and coordinate their efforts.

What has been the role of elected politicians, city planners and public agencies in the creation of Fantasy City? In [Chapter 7](#) I examine the public-private partnerships which support this new generation of downtown developments and assess the financial benefits and costs to the community of these arrangements. In particular, sports stadiums and arenas have been identified as a special trouble spot, siphoning off large sums of tax dollars while offering limited returns. Drawing on recent research by Mark Rosentraub and others, I offer an assessment of the economics of these professional sports facilities and the problems which surround them.

If one city could be said to represent the successful development of fantasy cities, that city would be Las Vegas. Once regarded as a seedy mixture of neon, glitter, blackjack and organized crime, Vegas today is a booming entertainment center which has aimed its sights at family vacationers by providing an infrastructure of amusement parks, magic shows and themed hotels. In [Chapter 8](#) I profile the “New Las Vegas” and compare its economic miracle to the rapidly expanding but frequently troubled gaming industry which in its wake has churned up riverboat gambling, native-run casinos, and start and stop expansion in Atlantic City.

While a large part of *Fantasy City* focuses exclusively on, the odyssey of urban entertainment in twentieth-century America, the “leisure revolution” has recently spread offshore. Nowhere is this more striking than on the Asia-Pacific Rim where two decades of economic prosperity has produced a tidal wave of new urban theme parks, resort hotels, multiplex cinemas and even ice rinks. In [Chapter 9](#) I trace the rise of the booming themed entertainment industry in Australia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and other nation states in the region, contrasting its form and function with that of the North American. This provides an especially pertinent example with which to examine the penetration of multinational capitalism into Asia and its attendant cultural impacts.

In [Chapter 10](#) *Fantasy City* concludes by looking at the impact of the new urban entertainment economy on the future of cities. Will it become, as Soja (1996) fears, a defining feature of the social construction of urban life, accelerating the destruction of local vernaculars and identities and destroying what limited degree of public, democratic space remains in the postmodern metropolis? Or is it the Rosetta Stone of urban revitalization, unlocking the secret code of how to bring people back to the city center in order to discover a new form of civic sociability? Much depends, I argue, on cities themselves. Urban policy-makers need to be proactive rather than reactive, they need to become full collaborative partners with the private sector rather than supplicants who enter into flawed and costly development deals. And of equal importance, they must not fail to recognize and accommodate the cultural diversity in the community in favor of a generic model of UED development which is only destined to succeed in a handful of tourist-rich cities.

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