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Reveries of Florida's Past: Documenting Historic & Imagined Florida

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At a September 2015 waterfront celebration along Village Lake, Floridians gathered to christen a new township founded in 1850. The naming ceremony was complete with an emcee, magician, media, and business leaders coming together at Waterview Park to commemorate the

event. At the time of the ceremony, signs on I-4 already marked the way to the new community with a dedicated off-ramp opening the following month (Bevil 2015). The community's historic roots parallel the development of numerous others spread across the state as it grew from modest hamlet to bustling city. Just before the Civil War, South Carolina settlers happened upon an Edenic natural spring and the Sinclair family established a homestead along the water. As throughout the state, the industries that define Florida's

past found a footing. The Sinclair's established a successful cattle ranch. In 1868 a timber company set up shop. Later, a bottling company began packaging and distributing the fresh, natural spring water. At the start of the twentieth century, the township welcomed municipal facilities. In 1901 a new power plant electrified the town. By 1908, the first fire department was watching over the residents. When the town celebrated their centennial in 1950, residents could look back and admire their idyllic community with its Mediterranean inspired fountains and plazas, craftsmen style bungalows, expanding industrial diversification, and bustling transportation hub complete with marina, airport, and train station.

The establishment of a town with more than 150 years of history in 2015 isn't the result of a chronologically challenged citizenry or some recently discovered oversight in the municipal incorporation process. Known as "Disney Springs," the site is the product of The Walt Disney Company's themed design and storytelling at its redesigned retail complex along I-4 formerly known as

Downtown Disney. Though narrated by the company as a historic Florida town, the location dates to 1975 and has always been a retail, dining, and entertainment complex accompanying the Walt Disney World Resort theme parks and hotels (Kurti 1996, 68).

The current iteration of Disney's commercial complex looks to Florida's past as a means to culturally anchor the development in Central Florida and inspire the space's fictional narrative. When initially announcing the project, Disney Chief Operating Officer Tom Staggs described the core of Disney Spring's storyline as representing "a timeless and vibrant place that celebrates turn-of-the-century lakeside towns that dotted the Florida landscape" (Staggs 2013). To achieve such a goal, Disney designers, or "Imagineers," constructed the façade of a historic Florida town repurposed as a retail space. Upon completion, The Walt Disney Company describes Disney Springs as "a bustling metropolis of shopping, dining, and entertainment locations" (Disney Springs: Fast Facts, Fun Facts) with four distinct neighborhoods representing various eras of the town's historic progression.

During the construction of Disney Springs and since its completion, spokespeople for The Walt Disney Company and marketing content emphasize producing an accurate portrayal of Florida. For example, Theron Skees, Executive Creative Director, focused on how the company was “committed to deliver something as authentic as possible” (qtd. in Jones 2016). Similarly, Editorial Content Manager Jennifer Fickley-Baker of the *Disney Parks Blog* described Disney Springs as a creation that “immerses guests into the rich cultural heritage and natural beauty of Florida through unique architecture, color, schemes, horticulture, and more” (Fickley-Baker, 2016). Again, Creative Director, Dave Hoffman emphasized how Disney Springs reflects Florida’s past over the last 150 years “and all the details reflect authenticity” (qtd. in Dowling, 2016).

In the emphasis on recreated authenticity and accuracy, Jean Baudrillard theorizes such an effort “threatens the difference between true and false, the real and the imaginary” (1994, 3). Throughout Disney Springs’ neighborhoods, visitors encounter a plethora of immersive details from

architectural features to artificially aged graphics as a method to visibly and tangibly illustrate the fabricated historic narrative of the retail complex. The resulting visual plane engages visitors by placing them in a fictionalized and coordinated physical space known as a “hyperreality,” inspired by the reveries, or fanciful manifestations of “daydream demands” (Eco 1986, 44), of real and historic places from across the state of Florida. What follows is an effort to document the borders and blurring of the real and the hyperreal reveries of Florida’s past at Disney Springs.

Method and Sources:

The following fourteen photographic displays document the various manifestations of historic Florida places and their hyperreal counterparts at Disney Springs. The displays make use of archival historic photographs of Florida dating back more than a century and modern photographs of Disney Springs over the last two years. The resulting collages seek to draw attention to the real and historic places of Florida that have become representative of the state’s true past alongside their

touristic counterparts as constructed by The Walt Disney Company. Side by side, we can contemplate how Florida continues to be packaged and romanticized in popular culture and what is selectively providing the fodder for such perceptions. The result is a photographic exploration of what The Walt Disney Company is constructing and presenting to thousands of consumers and how such a presentation is shaping what is recognizably Florida.

On Photography & Historic Photographs

Historic photographs are sourced from the digital collections of the Florida Memory, Florida Photographic Collection at the State Library and Archives of Florida and the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. The selected historic photographs are digital duplications incorporated into single displays organized by subject and topic. Modern digital images used in this project come from photographs taken by the author in the summers of 2017 and 2018 using two consumer grade digital cameras. Photographs from 2017 were taken using a Sony

Cyber-Shot DSC-HX5V with a 10.2-megapixel resolution and fixed 10x wide-angle optical zoom lens.

Photographs from 2018 were taken using a Canon PowerShot G7 Mark II with 20.1-megapixel resolution and a fixed 4.2x optical wide-angle zoom lens.

The manipulation of digital photographs was kept to a minimum where possible. Digital alterations include cropping images to focus on specific design features. Other forms of digital manipulation included reducing or stretching an image's size to aesthetically fit within displays. Digital files, both modern and historical, were JPEGs when incorporated into displays and the collective collages are produced as JPEGs as well.

Locating images in the Florida Photographic Collection and the Library of Congress consisted of utilizing archival terminology categorized through the Catalogue of Subject Terms, Geographic Terms, and Personal Subjects and keyword searches and phrases relevant to the project. In researching various elements of Disney Springs, the current project used more than fifty

distinct search terms. Search terms focused on the function of structures such as "Fishing Camps," specific locations like "Church Street Station," or prominent Florida developers such as "Rudolph, Paul." Some terms generated overlapping results such as "Mizner, Addison, 1872-1933" and "Worth Avenue," however most searches produced unique results. Consequently, more than 5,000 historic photographs were examined for the project.

The photographic arrangements are organized by subject pertaining to architectural styles, specific places, and building functions. In total, fifty-seven images make up the fourteen assemblages. Thirty-six images come from the historic photograph collections at the Florida Memory Collection and the Library of Congress. The remaining twenty-two included images are modern photographs. The displays all maintain the original color scheme of incorporated photographs. In most displays, the modern photographs of Disney Springs will be evident to viewers due to disparities in color and image clarity. The displays are arranged throughout the essay

based on their associated neighborhood in Disney Springs.

Historic & Imagined Spaces



The Springs

The cool, fresh water springs of Florida have drawn explorers, migrants, and tourists for centuries. The fabricated, chemically treated springs at the center of Disney Springs provides the impetus for the origin of the town's fictional narrative. As mentioned, the discovery of the springs in Central Florida inspired settlers to establish a homestead in 1850. Afterwards, businesses prospered, new entrepreneurs came to town, and Disney Springs evolved with the state of Florida over time. It is unlikely a modern-day visitor will miss the namesake of the retail complex.

The spring at the center of Disney Springs makes a functional distinction

as purely for visual appreciation. It has multiple pedestrian bridges crossing the waterway and walking paths around its perimeter but no direct interaction between tourist and water. Famously, The Walt Disney World Resort has crafted waterborne attractions featuring jungle adventures, pirate encounters, and riverboat rides. The resort has also utilized naturally occurring, through manually enhanced, waterways to provide added methods of transportation to travel across the sprawling property. With such a differentiation, the spring of Disney Springs therefore functions solely as a visual marker to enhance the narrative of the space's fabricated past.

Reveries alongside The Springs



Disney's undertaking to manufacture an authentic Florida spring attempts

to dissolve the distinction between reality and hyperreality. Disney designers describe the construction of the spring as using "various shades of bright glass pieces as accent colors to make the springs glitter," incorporating nearby live oak and cypress trees into the design of the spring's bank, and sculpting the concrete bottom to add depth to the waterway (Fickley-Baker 2016). Still, the manufactured spring borders the natural waterway of Village Lake. The contrast between artificial spring and the natural lake visibly underscore the presentation of reverie and reality at Disney Springs.



As the retail complex's centerpiece, the shore of the artificial waterway borders each of the four neighborhoods of Disney Springs. Along the banks of the spring, three structures break with the overarching design of the neighborhood they are in

to connect with the spring as a point of the community's conception. In The Landing, a restaurant personifies a Florida fish camp set alongside the spring's bank. In the Town Center, another restaurant presents as a rustic Cracker homestead. The information and guest services center for Disney Springs is in a "wooden American revival" style structure as described in the resort's official guide book (*Birnbaum's 2017 2016*, 218) with stylistic parallels to buildings of 1930s Florida.



Marketplace

The neighborhood that makes up Disney Spring's Marketplace roughly sits on the footprint of the Walt Disney World Resort's first retail and dining complex originally known as "Lake Buena Vista Shopping Village." Opened in June 1975, Jackson Olsen, Vice President of Merchandising for The Walt Disney Company at the time,

described the area as designed "to serve guests of the community, as well as residents and travelers through the Central Florida region" (*Lakeland Ledger*, 1975). The retail center offered 29 shops and four restaurants. Initially, the complex provided 648 parking spaces and more than doubled availability by the end of their first year of operation (Fiero). Later, the officially licensed Walt Disney World guidebook compared the area to "any other fine shopping area in America" (*Steve Birnbaum . . . 1990 1989*, 121).

As a result of The Walt Disney Company's most recent redevelopment of the Marketplace neighborhood, the shopping area relies on a 1930s American Craftsmen style to chronologically orient the space and integrate it into the Disney Springs narrative. As described by Skees "The Craftsman-style Marketplace dates back to the 1930s and 1940s" and provides a more handcrafted presentation (qtd. in Deitchman 2016). The choice fits nicely into the narrative of Disney Springs but may have also been a product of cost-effective convenience. The original styling of Lake Buena

Vista Shopping Village offered Disney designers the opportunity to provide the district with a cosmetic overlay rather than an entire reconstruction. A 1980s guidebook described the retail center as “arranged in eight low-lying, shingle-sided buildings” (*Steve Birnbaum . . . 1990* 1989, 121). While the area is substantially larger in 2018, the original aesthetic proved pliable to fit into Disney Springs’ new thematic design.

The current manifestation of the retail neighborhood maintains its original intent as the resort’s branded retail district. Patrons will find an abundance of stores that feature Disney merchandise. Notably, the Marketplace is home to the largest Disney Store in the world. Similar to its 1975 opening, the Marketplace features tourist focused retail such as a toy store, year-round Christmas shop, and other souvenir items such as ornamental candles, cut-glass figurines, and gourmet candies.

Reveries in the Marketplace



In terms of visual engagement, visitors to the Marketplace are confronted with two distinct manifestations for Florida’s past. As mentioned, most of the area is designed to evoke the American craftsmen style popular in the 1930s. Additionally, visitors will encounter “Dockside Margaritas” described as a waterfront bar where patrons can “get a taste of the Sunshine State” (*Birnbaum’s 2017* 2016, 304). Fitting with the repurposed aesthetic of iconic Florida traditions, the structure is modeled as a former Florida roadside fruit stand of the 1960s (“Dockside Margaritas”).



The Landing

Unlike much of Disney Springs, The Landing neighborhood is a repurposed space. The neighborhood is built over Walt Disney World Resort's defunct "Pleasure Island." In operation from 1989 to 2008, Pleasure Island sat on a six-acre manmade island along the lakefront connected to the shore by large pedestrian bridges. Whereas the Marketplace regularly catered to company branded retail, Pleasure Island provided adult nightlife, entertainment, and dining. During much its tenure, Pleasure Island was an admission gated venue catering to visitors 18 years of age and older. Evening entertainment such as a comedy club, lounges, and dance club regularly stayed open until midnight or later (*Steve Birnbaum . . . 1983 1982, 175-177*). However, starting in 2006 The Walt Disney Company began shuttering Pleasure

Island venues and entertainment with an eye to a more family friendly space (Power and Chediak 2006).

The reconstruction of Pleasure Island into The Landing does repurpose and thematically redefine the space and structures but for much the same purpose. The Landing utilizes the same six-acre plot and pedestrian bridges. In line with the 2006 redirection by The Walt Disney Company, the current iteration stays away from an adults-only entertainment venue. However, The Landing does provide late-night dining and entertainment options. Also, the area no longer charges a separate admission and provides daytime shopping and dining options.

The theming of The Landing presents a repurposed industrial district and transportation hub. Chronologically, the design of The Landing spans from the early 1900s to the 1970s. Within the Disney Springs narrative, the repurposed facades of mass-transportation terminals demonstrate the vitality of the community and the passage of time. The narrative is further reinforced with a compass motif laid out over a large brick plaza. The four points of the

compass are tipped with inlaid medallions depicting advancements in transportation from a horse drawn carriage to a paddleboat steamer to a train to an airplane.

Reveries in The Landing



Visitors to The Landing neighborhood of Disney Springs are confronted with visual elements that are distinctly inspired by Florida’s past places and others that are more chronologically anchored. At one end of The Landing is a high-end steak house located in the façade of a

repurposed railroad depot reminiscent of Church Street Station. At the opposite end, the functional marina at The Landing employs a style familiar to the Seaside resort community in Florida’s panhandle. Visitors will also encounter the facades of a power plant and airplane hangar constructed to emulate structures from the early 1900s and 1940s, respectively.



West Side

The West Side also pre-dates the Disney Springs overlay. Opened in

1997 as an expansion to Pleasure Island and the Marketplace, the district focused on consumer entertainment in music, food, and experiences. A “House of Blues” franchise added a 2,000-seat music venue. A custom built 70,000 square-foot, 1,650-seat theatre provided resident space for the Canadian-based Cirque du Soleil performances (*Birnbaum’s 1998 1997*, 185-186). Finally, “DisneyQuest” offered an interactive, high-tech five-story indoor attraction (Pecho 1998). At the time, the West Side was more focused on purpose and function rather than theme. The area tangentially tied into the downtown aesthetic of the three loosely affiliated districts (Marketplace, Pleasure Island, & West Side) when The Walt Disney Company renamed the entire complex “Downtown Disney” in 1997.

In the context of the Disney Springs narrative, the West Side is the most recent district in relation to the other three neighborhoods. The West Side, according to Disney storytelling, dates to 1950 when town celebrated its centennial. The celebration welcomed industry and demonstrations akin to a World’s Fair.

Once the celebration concluded, the expo buildings remained and are now occupied by modern entertainment providers and restaurants (Deitchman 2016). The thematic modifications in the West Side are similar to the changes seen in the Marketplace. The adjustments to the West Side featured façade additions rather than a complete reconstruction as done in The Landing or Town Center. Designers added narrative features such as a plaque commemorating the 1950 exposition and added segments of an elevated rail line to enhance visual immersion.

Reveries in the West Side



The West Side utilizes two distinctive Florida trends which visitors will visually encounter. Along a lengthy walkway, Disney designers crafted a row of storefront facades in the vein of Florida’s iconic Art Deco style akin to Miami’s famous South

Beach. Additionally, a national coffee franchise has taken up residence in a new structure styled in Florida's Sarasota School made famous by architects such as Paul Rudolph and Ralph Twitchell.

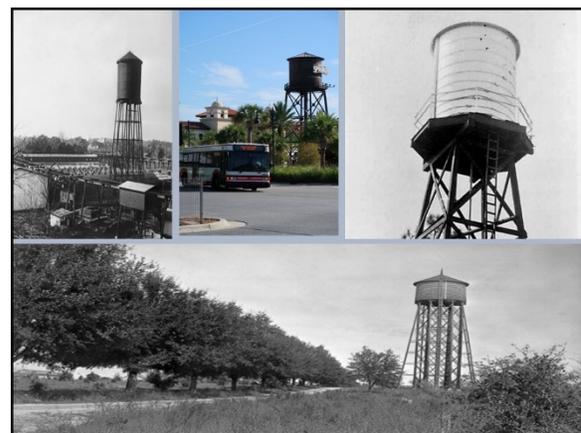


Town Center

The Town Center neighborhood is the newest addition to the Walt Disney World Resort's retail and entertainment complex. It officially opened in May 2016. The district was built south of The Landing and between the West Side and Marketplace. Completion of the Town Center fashions the entire retail complex into roughly a diamond shape as opposed to the former curved line along Village Lake. The neighborhood also functions as the main entryway for visitors arriving by personal vehicle or resort provided bus transportation (Clark 2016).

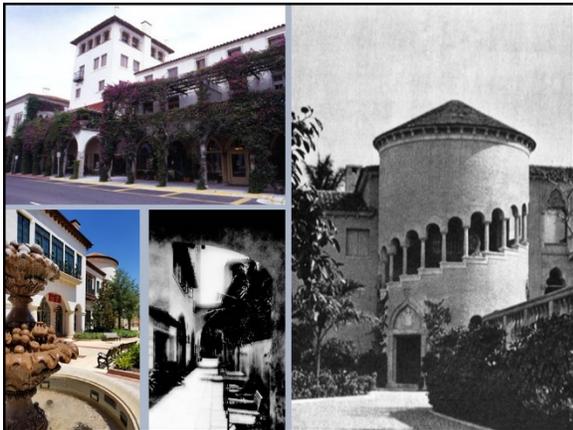
The themed narrative of the Town Center neighborhood provides the anchor for the Disney Springs storyline. Built from the ground up, it is also the most cohesively themed district in Disney Springs. According to the town's fictional narrative, the Town Center dates to the 1920s and was the community's first definable neighborhood. To correspond with Florida's past, the Town Center features "Mediterranean revival style that was popular in Florida" as described in Walt Disney World's official guide book (*Birnbaum's 2017* 2016, 218). The retail district features high-end shops and lifestyle retail establishments along with some dining options.

Reveries in the Town Center



The Town Center's utilization of Spanish Revival design is the most comprehensive of any design schema

of the four neighborhoods. Throughout the Town Center, fabricated visual cues recreate the style of iconic Florida developers such as Addison Mizner. Design features mimic the style of Mizner's 1919 Everglades Club and his 1920s Via Mizner on Worth Avenue in Palm Beach, Florida. Less unique to Florida, the entry way into the Town Center features a large multistory water town emblazoned with a "Disney Springs" marquee over an artificially faded banner reading "Come and Visit the Springs, Florida."



* * *

It's likely too soon to calculate how the reveries of Florida's past at Disney Springs will impact perceptions of the state or the state itself. What is likely safe to assume is that Disney Springs is now the most visited "spring" in the state of Florida. In 2017, the four

theme parks that make up Walt Disney World Resort in Central Florida drew in more than 55 million visitors. The Themed Entertainment Association's annual report on theme park and museum industry attendance suggested that Disney Springs is "being very well received (by tourists) and adds to the general appeal" of the resort (2017, 10 and 24). As a free to access retail complex, The Walt Disney Company does not report the total number of visitors to Disney Springs specifically. Therefore, it's only possible to speculate the annual number of visitors to Disney Springs each year. In the event even a small fraction of the resort's 55 million visitors spends an afternoon at Disney Springs, the annual number of tourists likely reaches into the millions. For comparison, an economic impact study by the state of Florida found that Blue Springs in Volusia County only counted 589,941 visitors for the 2016-2017 fiscal year. In relation to other springs managed by the state park system, Blue Springs is one of the best performing in terms of number of visitors (Florida DEP 2017). Florida destinations like Blue Springs and Disney Springs are certainly

divergent in terms of visitor utilization and experience. However, the influence of Disney Springs has the potential to overshadow conceptions of Florida's real places, past and present, throughout the state. At Disney Springs, visitors are confronted with a depiction of Florida mediated through the intersection of consumerism, entertainment, and history reimagined in yet one more vision of how the state's past is remembered for public consumption.

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Water Towers.

Top (left to right): *Bagdad Land and Lumber Company.* 193-. Black & white photonegative, Bagdad, Florida. State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

<<https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/141842>>; photo by author, Lake Buena Vista, Florida, August 2018; Coulter, C. H. *Water tank and tower.* 1937. Black & white photoprint. Olustee, Florida. State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

<<https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/62697>>; Bottom: *Orange City water tower on Volusia Avenue.* ca 1895. Black & white photonegative. State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

<<https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/145579>>.

Spanish Revival.

Clockwise from top left: *Via Mizner shopping area on Worth Ave. in Palm Beach.* Not before 1969. Color side,. State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

<<https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/325173>>; *Casa Nana front entrance and stair tower – Palm Beach, Florida.* Ca. 1928. Black & white photonegative, 4x5 in. State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

<<https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/145933>>; *Via Mizner alley of shops – Palm Beach, Florida.* Ca 1928. Black & white photonegative, 4x5. State Archives of Florida, Florida

Memory.

<<https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/145952>>; photo by author,
Lake Buena Vista, Florida, August
2017.