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Around the World in Two Days:

Walt Disney's Epcot Center and the World's Fair Tradition

Annie Davis

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Becoming a world traveler is extremely simple with just one visit to Walt Disney World's EPCOT Center. Any guest can "visit" France, China, Italy, Germany, and beyond under one entrance fee, allowing them to try "authentic" food and see unique entertainment. Guests can also experience technology from the future, and see the progress that has been made in technology of the present. These concepts may sound extremely familiar to those who have visited or heard of any of the World's Fairs presented in the last century. They are similar enough that Epcot Center has often been deemed a "permanent World's Fair," a living representation of the unique experiences that continue to thrill many visitors around the world.

In viewing Epcot Center alongside the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, 1983 Columbian Exposition, as well as the 1964 New York World's Fair, it will be argued that Epcot Center continues the performative, "othering" and orientalist, and consumerist traditions that were established at the World's Fair. In particular, the idea of "authentic" representation of diverse cultures was constructed while these international exhibits were made distinct from the representation of "progress," all the while emphasizing the consumerist aspect of a theme park.

The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago as well as the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis provide a basis for the "othering" of various countries that was established in the first world's fairs. The 1964 New York World's Fairs, though continuing the tradition of othering and orientalism in its own, more subdued, way, provides context for the consumerist trends that are at the forefront of Epcot Center due to the involvement of the Walt Disney Company at the fair as well as the clear similarities between Epcot and the fair.

Historiography

In discussing the orientalist, consumerist, and performative traditions of the world's fair, many historians have provided analysis on many different fairs, though there are few on Epcot Center. The main text which has discussed Epcot Center and the World's Fair alongside one another is Steve Nelson's "Walt Disney's Epcot and the World's Fair Performance Tradition." This article was published in 1986, just four years after the opening of Epcot. Nelson argues that Epcot's attractions and entertainment are similar to those seen at the World's Fair, and that the tradition of these fairs—including orientalist representation—continues on. Nelson's text is important to the argument as he views the park in its most original form, providing critiques of cultural entertainment and other similar aspects that were seen at the World's Fair.¹ While this analysis is similar to the one presented in this paper, the continuation of the orientalist themes as the park has evolved as well as a closer look at consumerism broaden the analysis that Nelson had presented prior.

There are other scholars who have contributed to the analysis of Epcot Center and the orientalist and consumerist themes of the park, including Randall Shepard, Andrea Stulman Dennett, and Charles Carson are a few which were viewed in the creation of this analysis. Randall specifically views the Mexico pavilion of the world showcase, and part of his argument ties into the themes of "authenticity" and involvement of Mexican artists in the creation of the pavilion. Randall also writes on the unwillingness of the Walt Disney Company to release archival information pertaining to the creation of the park—to be discussed in relation to this

¹ Steve Nelson. "Walt Disney's Epcot and the World's Fair Performance Tradition." *The Drama Review: TDR* 30, no. 4 (1986): 106–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1145786>.

paper's theoretical grounding section.² Stulman views the idea of the “world traveler” and “public history” that is brought forth in Epcot's “American Adventure” show. Stulman's analysis is important in viewing thinking about authenticity—providing a historical narrative that is not entirely accurate through entertainment.³ Carson takes a different approach to the experience of visiting the parks, viewing the music that tells the story in various areas as opposed to the actual attractions themselves. A main piece of his argument includes the boundaries that are created with music, creating the “other” through depictions of culture that are idealized and stereotypical.⁴ Shepard, Dennett, and Carson are just a few scholars who have contributed to the discussion of Epcot, and Disney parks generally, and their connections to “othering,” consumerism, and performativity.

There are many authors who have contributed to discussion on the world's fair, though there are a few scholars to mention who have impacted the research areas in general before moving on to the fairs. Edward Said's *Orientalism* feels important to mention due to his impact in the discussions surrounding Orientalist studies, impacting how the idea of “othering” is viewed.⁵ As it is a foundational text in this field, it has surely impacted many scholars who have discussed these areas of the world's fairs and beyond. Moving on to the world's fairs, Timothy Mitchell, who will be discussed later, Joseph Heathcott, Julie Nicoletta, and Robert W. Rydell are just a few who contribute to the analysis of “othering,” performativity, and consumerism at the world's fair. Heathcott analyzes the fair's organization, from the actual way it was organized

² Randall Sheppard. “Mexico Goes To Disney World: Recognizing and Representing Mexico at EPCOT Center's Mexico Pavilion.” *Latin American Research Review* 51, no. 3 (2016): 64–84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44000356>.

³ Andrea Stulman Dennett “A Postmodern Look at EPCOT's American Adventure” *Journal of American Culture* 12, no. 1 (1989): 47–53.

⁴ Charles Carson. ““Whole New Worlds’: Music and the Disney Theme Park Experience.” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, no. 2 (2004): 228–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20184483>.

⁵ Edward Said. *Orientalism*, Penguin Modern Classics. London, England: Penguin Classics, 1978.

on the ground to the decisions that were being made in the design of the fair behind the scenes, telling the story of “imperial mastery.”⁶ Nicoletta views the 1964 New York World’s Fair through the art pavilions and the inclusion of many nations alongside commercial and consumerist contexts of the fair.⁷ Rydell’s book *All the World’s a Fair* discusses the racial exploitation that occurred at the early world’s fairs, following the impacts of this exploitation in the “othering” of non-white peoples.⁸ Heathcott, Nicoletta, and Rydell each contribute to the analysis of “othering,” consumerism, and performativity of the world’s fairs, the basis for the comparison of Epcot Center alongside the world’s fairs.

Theoretical Grounding

The three main points mentioned previously: performativity, othering and orientalism, and consumerism, are the main lenses of analysis used to view the world’s fair and Epcot Center together. In thinking about the performative aspect of the World’s Fair and Epcot Center, this refers to the idea of authenticity. While the experiences at the park, including dining and entertainment, are marketed as “authentic,” they are not truly. Othering and orientalism in this context refer to the representation of the pavilions at the world’s fair and Epcot Center, showing the intentional separation of international experiences from the idea of progress and technological advancement. Consumerism within the world’s fairs and Epcot Center views the aspect of marketing and authenticity as well, viewing the experience of the “world traveler” and the costs of the trip to Epcot as well as travels to actual countries that were represented at the

⁶ Joseph Heathcott. “Ephemeral City: Design and Civic Meaning at the 1904 World’s Fair.” *Journal of Design History* 26, no. 1 (2013): 25–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23353730>.

⁷ Julie Nicoletta. “Art Out Of Place: International Art Exhibits At The New York World’s Fair Of 1964-1965.” *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 2 (2010): 499–519. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25790368>.

⁸ Robert W. Rydell. *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

world's fairs and Epcot. These three themes help to understand the main similarities between Epcot and the world's fair as well as the changes that occurred, making them different from one another.

In analyzing Epcot Center as a World's Fair, one pertinent author is Timothy Mitchell. Mitchell's work, *Colonising Egypt*, examines the World's Fair tradition under the lens of the "world as exhibition," considering the impact of these exhibits on the visitor as well as the impact that the guest, or consumer, had on these exhibits. Mitchell specifically looks at Egypt, but these ideas can be applied to any of these "othered" spaces. For example, he points out that it was often difficult to recognize where the exhibition ended and where the actual cities began due to the large footprint of the fair. Mitchell's discussion often differs from the norm in this idea, even comparing the photographs to the panopticon, in viewing how the photographer is positioned, and mentioning the commodification of the experience.⁹ He states, "World exhibition here refers not to an exhibition of the world, but to the world conceived and grasped as though it were an exhibition."¹⁰ This is important in the understanding of Epcot due to the idea of the "world traveler" in these created spaces, essentially taking away the same ideas that Mitchell presents in the World's Fair to the park itself.

Another interesting view of Epcot and the World's Fair comes from a book meant to accompany an exhibition, titled, *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*.¹¹ This book views the architectural side of the creation of Disneyland and Disney World, bringing many intriguing pieces of information to the forefront on the setup of the fairs

⁹ Timothy Mitchell. *Colonising Egypt: With a New Preface*. University of California Press, 1988: 18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppbcx>.

¹⁰ Mitchell, 13.

¹¹ Karal Ann Marling. *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*. Flammarion Press: Canada, 1998.

and Epcot, offering a unique perspective. Between the historical perspective given throughout the text on why buildings were designed a certain way and information provided on the evolution of projects, it is easy to understand the impact that the world's fair had on many of these designs. This book provides historical background for many projects that would become Epcot Center, looking at the architectural and historical discussions in creating and building the park.

Maps are an important piece to the analysis of Epcot Center and the world's fairs as the use of space is always intentional in commercial interests. Maps of the fairs and the park can be read as representations of the ideologies of organizers due to their gain in the flow of people throughout the park. Thinking about what the best way to capture attention for entertainment, souvenirs, dining, and attractions is an integral part of intentional placement of features. Maps from the 1893 Columbian Exposition, 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, 1964 New York World's Fair, and Epcot Center will be viewed individually and in relation to one another in this analysis to show the placement of pavilions and important areas of the park, as well as the changes that occurred over time.

In researching Epcot Center, it is important to note that Walt Disney Company archives are not accessible to the public. These archives require an online login to a database with company identification, and are not meant to be used without permissions. This means that many sources come from unofficial archives made up of official documents, created by past employees, visitors who have collected park memorabilia since park opening, and communities dedicated to the preservation of theme park history. This also alludes to the difference in the "official" voice of the Walt Disney Company in the theme park affairs in comparison to their reality—they will release what is beneficial to them and nothing more. In the same way that Randall Shepard ran into problems accessing official documents from the organization itself, it is

simple to use those involved in the company and those who are dedicated to the company's history as unofficial holdings of these archives.

On the other hand, documents relating to the three World's Fairs discussed are from official state archives. The Louisiana Purchase Exposition includes documents from the Missouri State archives, the Columbian Exposition includes documents from the Illinois State Archives, and the New York World's Fair includes documents from institutions such as the New York Public Library. Archives beyond these were accessed as well. Similar to the case of Epcot Center's unofficial archives created by individuals made up of official documents, the world's fairs do have a large following of communities that create similar archives, and some maps and other media documents come from similar databases.

The Columbian Exposition, Chicago (1893)

Before viewing Epcot Center itself alongside these fairs, it is important to understand their orientalist and consumerist ideology to see how they would later be represented Florida. While not entirely relevant to the analysis of Epcot's orientalist and consumerist ideology that continues the tradition of the World's Fair, it is interesting to note due to the influences these experiences likely had on the development of theme parks in general, not only Epcot.

The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago was the first large World's Fair in the United States. Taking place at the turn of the century, this fair provided a glimpse into the new technologies that would become available to visitors in their daily lives, at the height of progress. In viewing a map of the Columbian Exposition, one large part of the fair is seen on the right, and another small section juts out from this section. This area is the "Midway," a term which originated at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in the new context: referring to the *Merriam-*

Webster definition of, “an avenue at a fair, carnival, or amusement park for concessions and amusements.”¹² This word is often used today to recognize the amusement section of state and county fairs without a second thought to its origins, spaces which have become less focused on orientalism and side-shows and are instead truly for amusement purposes. Images of the Midway show the likes of men riding on elephants, donkeys, dressed as clowns, and other animals roaming the area.¹³ This space is separated—an intentional move—from the rest of the fair. Visitors had to make an effort to stop by the attractions in the Midway as opposed to the Agriculture building, or the Fine Arts exhibits. *An Official Guide to the Midway Plaisance: The Authorized Official Guide to the World’s Columbian Exposition* provides all the information a visitor to the Columbian Exposition needs on this area of the fair, on these “peculiar exhibits.”¹⁴ The Midway is also called “The Highway Through the Nations” in this guide, including “an absolutely correct map” of the area. This guide also provides information on the costs of these exhibits: Many are free, but most cost between ten and twenty-five cents—some are even one dollar.¹⁵

One attraction along the Midway was “The Street in Cairo,” which cost between ten and twenty-five cents to experience. The guide draws in the visitor by describing the scene, “Only a few steps from the crowded roadway one finds oneself in the venter of a busy thoroughfare in ancient Egypt, where the architecture, the surroundings, and the people are so far removed...” from anything like an American visitor could imagine in their hometowns.¹⁶ The donkey and

¹² Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “Midway,” accessed December 7, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/midway>.

¹³ Frances Benjamin Johnston. *World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago Midway*. Chicago Illinois, 1893. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006680022/>.

¹⁴ John J. Flinn. *Official guide to Midway Plaisance*, (Chicago, The Columbian guide company, 1893) <https://www.loc.gov/item/05028671/>, 1-3.

¹⁵ Flinn, 9-11.

¹⁶ Flinn, 20.

camel rides are mentioned as well as the necessity of a visit to the tombs of ancient kings which “everybody visits them,” so that one can fade away from the “modern Chicago” and experience living in a world that is not as advanced. This directly leads to the discussion of the “other” as well as the commodification of the experience—these people are being used for entertainment and to be viewed as an exhibit themselves, and are a space to earn money rather than actually experience the true culture of Egypt. Timothy Mitchell’s analysis within *Colonising Egypt* on the “world as exhibit” can directly be seen here in the recognition of how these exhibits are viewed.

The 1893 Columbian Exhibition is of the first large world’s fairs that take place in the United States, providing a good look into the “othering” of peoples exhibited at the fair in comparison to those who are viewed later, the commodification of the experience which one can see shift after World War I and World War II, as well as the performative aspect of scenes such as the “Street in Cairo,” presenting an “authentic” experience that is not authentic to reality.

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis (1904)

The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition was the first large-scale fair to occur in the United States in the years following the Columbian Exposition, and the last notable United States fair to occur before World War I. This fair continues the trends seen in the 1893 Columbian Exhibition, and reinforces these early stereotypical fair displays. The Louisiana Purchase Exposition is used to show the ways the earliest fairs were presenting the “othering” of individuals and cultures, consumerist experiences, and performative authenticity, allowing one to view the way the fair shifts in the future, as well as being able to recognize these aspects at Epcot Center.

When viewing a map of the fair, one can see the different areas that were represented and the similarities to the Columbian Exposition.¹⁷ The main area of the exhibition consists of technological and machinery progress, to one side various states are represented, and to the other the forestry division and a large area for agriculture are shown. At the bottom of the exhibition lies the area titled “The Pike.” This area is dwarfed by the grand pavilions for progress, leaving small areas for cultural interactions to occur. This area is clearly separated from the technological advancements seen in the Transportation, Electricity and Machinery, and Manufactures pavilions, where the Grand Basin and Festival Hall lie. While the areas that are considered the “other” are placed in this area of the exhibition, other countries have pavilions throughout the fair, placed a bit awkwardly near the Pike but still outside of it nearby.

This separation of the Pike from the rest of the fair is nearly identical to the separation of the Midway from the rest of the exhibition at the Columbian Exposition, though at least not shoved entirely to the side. These pavilions still would have to be intentionally visited—there is no casual passing through the area to get to other areas instead. This is the beginning of the “othering” at the world’s fair, as within the area itself, accurate representation is not priority. These pavilions have housed replicas of other countries they were representing which were not often entirely accurate and created spaces viewed as the “Oriental other.” Timothy Mitchell explains in *Colonising Egypt* similar displays and how these presentations were viewed by the general Western audience.¹⁸

¹⁷ “Official Ground Plan, World’s Fair, St. Louis, 1904.” *St. Louis, Woodard and Tiernan Ptg. Co.* <https://mdh.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/muellis/id/218/rec/24>.

¹⁸ Timothy Mitchell. *Colonising Egypt: With a New Preface*. University of California Press, 1988: 1-33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppbcx>.

The series of publications titled the “World’s Fair Bulletin” describe the happenings of the fair building process, opening, and end, which show the engaging conversations that were had between those who appear to be more involved in the fair. In one bulletin published in June of 1903, there is a headline which reads “One of the Most Interesting Portions of Constantinople to be Reproduced,” explaining that they will reproduce the “Bazaars of Stamboul, the most interesting sights of Constantinople, which the tourist never fails to visit.”¹⁹ This already points to the consumerist aspect of the display prior to it being built and seeing the engagement within the fair. The organizers had already recognized the importance of the area to the tourist rather than the individuals from Constantinople being the sole focus of the exhibit.

The Egypt-St. Louis Exposition Company was assigned to execute the designs that were created with communications to contacts in Constantinople, which shows there was at least some communication with the countries throughout the exhibition, even if the designs were not solely for representation and contributed to consumerism.²⁰ Also included in these communications mentioned in the bulletin were for “typical Spanish scenes” in the “Streets of Seville.”²¹ This already implies the Westernization of what typical “Spanish scenes” consist of. This section reads, “This concession grants the rights to reproduce typical Spanish scenes, chief of which will be the Court of Lions of the Alhambra, the Market Place of Triana, and the Gipsy Lane at Barcelona.” Aside from the blatant orientalism in this discussion, once again communications are presented between the country that is planned to be represented.

¹⁹ “The Bazaars of Stamboul” *World’s Fair Bulletin* (World’s Fair Publishing Company) July, 1903. <https://mdh.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/muellis/id/14434/rec/1>, 35.

²⁰ “The Bazaars of Stamboul,” 35.

²¹ “The Bazaars of Stamboul,” 40.

“The Complete and True Story of the Pike and It’s Attractions” is a publication by the St. Louis Fair press, describing the various attractions and their creation. The guide begins by stating, “Pikers may take their whirl down a mile of marvels in five hours and forty minutes if they follow the pave of modern America.”²² The visitors can travel the world in just a few hours—similar to the World Showcase in Epcot. The guide includes many images of the Pike attractions, providing visual background to the discussed attractions. There are many other oriental descriptions of these pavilions, including “crowded thoroughfares lead one into a scene ...Burmah, land of the white elephant, is represented by a native village of strange huts and lookouts, constructed of straw, bamboo, and tropical leaves.”²³ The use of the word “native” assumes that what one is viewing is accurate truly native reproductions instead of commercialized reproductions of the culture. The use of the word “strange” adds another layer as it provides the orientalist “othering” of the subject and at the same time creates a mysterious view of the cultural components, making visitors intrigued by the pavilion. Many other attractions are discussed similarly in detail, but these few instances provide a good glance into the way the various Pike attractions were received by audiences. I would move this paragraph up—even replacing the one before it or integrating elements into it. This paragraph explains why you are looking at St. Louis as a model for many of the elements that will be reproduced in Epcot Center

The other areas of discussion on the fair include the progress in technology and their advancements, though the St. Louis fair does not totally exclude other countries in the same way that other exhibitions had prior. One article, “Ephemeral City: Design and Civic Meaning at the

²² Thomas R. MacMechan. *The True and Complete Story of the Pike and its Attractions* (St. Louis: Louisiana Purchase Exposition), 1904. <https://mdh.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/muellis/id/251/rec/46>, 1.

²³ MacMechan, 6.

1904 World's Fair" by Joseph Heathcott discusses the setup of the fair and the designs of the buildings. This is similar to discussions throughout *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance* on the Disney parks creation and architectural views on these ideas. Historian Heathcott states, "the Pike provided a controlled space of commercial pleasure and thrill seeking...and thus subordinated the central narrative of Western Cultural progress."²⁴ He describes the main area of pavilions as a mainly metropolitan representation of the core attractions. There is recognition of the split between industrial and cultural in the creation of the exposition design throughout Heathcott's analysis on the architectural side of the exposition.

Through the analysis of both the Pike and the Midway at each of these early fairs, it is easier to understand the "othering" that occurred at the World's Fair. As discussed, the separation of these areas of the fair is intentional, as visitors to the fair would have to intentionally seek out the Midway and the Pike, and would likely not pass through it on their own. Though the way "othering" occurs continues to shift in the fairs that follow, it is still present in different ways, to be discussed in dealing with New York and Epcot Center.

New York World's Fair (1964-1965)

The 1964 New York World's Fair continues the traditions of the Chicago and St. Louis fairs, but is less obvious in its "othering" and orientalist conditions, leaning into the consumerist aspects of the fairs more heavily in the post-World War II environment. A 1965 edition of "Your Guide to the Fair," a brochure including maps, facts about the fair, important exhibit information, and space for plans to be written, provides two main sections in its descriptions: The "Industrial

²⁴ Joseph Heathcott. "Ephemeral City: Design and Civic Meaning at the 1904 World's Fair." *Journal of Design History* 26, no. 1 (2013): 34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23353730>.

Area” and the “International Area.”²⁵ The Industrial Area includes what one might expect—innovation including modern homes, photography, the gas industry, and population. This area also includes religious pavilions, including the Mormon Church as well as the Protestant and Orthodox Center.

In the International Area, there were forty-four pavilions, including many stereotypical orientalist descriptions and features. Many of these descriptions include primitivist language, with lines such as “named 2,000 tribal groups throughout the world which are still so primitive they have no written language,” and “music is provided for dancing and many Oriental groups perform during the dinner hour.”²⁶ There are some positive representations throughout the guide, but it seems that these spaces are being “othered” without conscious recognition of the authors of the brochures—the descriptions likely do not feel to those writing or reading them that they are out of the norm in representation of these peoples. While the New York World’s Fair does not separate the international exhibits from the rest of the fair as in Chicago and St. Louis, they still continue the tradition of “othering” in separating the countries from the idea of progress and using these areas as a source of entertainment.

Other pavilions included in the International Area are not actually international exhibits—the Christian Science pavilion, Billy Graham pavilion, and Sermon for Science pavilion are a few in this area. While it is not clear, the religions do seem to be grouped near some pavilions that are likely not promoting Christianity, and likely are made up of other religions. Below the International Area are the Federal and State Area and Transportation Area

²⁵ “Your Guide to the Fair” *The Travelers Insurance Companies*. New York, 1965: 14, <https://www.worldsfairphotos.com/nywf64/booklets/your-guide-to-fair.pdf>.

²⁶ “Your Guide to the Fair,” 6-8.

where various states are showcased and various modes of transportation are present for use and viewing.

In viewing a map of the fair, though the international exhibits are still disconnected from the areas of progress, these pavilions are at least included in the main area of the fair. They are actually sandwiched between the Industrial Area and Federal and State Area, meaning that it is likely visitors will have to pass through the area at least once to come into contact with the international pavilions. This is very different from the Midway or the Pike at Chicago and St. Louis—these areas were placed in spaces that visitors would have to intentionally visit. This is similar, though, to the setup of Epcot Center.

The 1964 World's Fair played an important role in the development of Disney parks due to the Walt Disney Company's involvement. WED Enterprises, which would later become known as Walt Disney Imagineering, seems to have essentially used the New York World's Fair as testing grounds for its ideas as it had lower stakes than creating permanent attractions. The Walt Disney Company had four exhibits at the fair: "It's a Small World" presented by UNICEF, "Great Moments With Mr. Lincoln" presented in the State of Illinois pavilion, "The Carousel Theater of Progress" presented by General Electric, and "Ford's Magic Skyway" presented by The Ford Motor Company.²⁷

The New York World's Fair Small World Cast Member Guide, *Ambassador of Happiness*, is extremely interesting as it is the first place that Disney park ideas are represented

²⁷ These exhibits would later be brought in some form to the various Disney parks. Small World would be placed at Disneyland and would later have a similar installment in Disney World. The Carousel of Progress would move to Disneyland and then be relocated to Disney World, and the concept for the ride would be used in "America Sings" at Disneyland. Great Moments With Mr. Lincoln would also move to Disneyland and be replicated in Disney World. Ford's Magic Skyway would not be brought to either park, but the technology used in the ride would be utilized in a ride created later, the Peppercorn.

outside of the parks. This booklet overall is very interesting, mainly due to the wording used throughout to describe the guest experience. The guide ends describing the ride, “The world’s children provide the theme for our happy ‘Small World’ attraction, and the Pepsi-Cola Co has provided UNICEF with a way to tell their story to the guests visiting from all over.”²⁸ Just a brief look into the way “Small World” is presented at the New York World’s Fair shows how important the appearance of cast members and the theme of the pavilion and the ride were to the attraction, which seems to impact the way that the Walt Disney Company presents Epcot Center.

EPCOT Center

Walt Disney’s Epcot Center opened October 1, 1982. Within the literature included in the Epcot opening press kit, the Walt Disney Company evokes similar feelings of the writing from the World’s Fairs. The press kit states, “EPCOT Center is described by its designers at WED Enterprises...as a permanent World’s Fair of imagination, discovery, education, and exploration that will never be complete.”²⁹ This is one of, or may be the only, use of the language “permanent world’s fair” within Walt Disney World media available in documents online that were written by the company. This press kit appears to have been written over five years in advance to the opening of the park, meaning this was promotional material dealing likely dealing with concepts of the space that would change as time went on.

As the park changed, language within their advertising shifted to the focus of the “futuristic” and “showcase” areas in the years following. Finding this language used at all within the Walt Disney Company is extremely interesting due to their avoidance of the phrasing in the

²⁸ *Ambassador of Happiness*, Walt Disney Company, 1964: 17, https://www.disneydocs.net/files/ugd/5db718_1d092883d51a4231a65304f4705989ab.pdf.

²⁹ “Epcot Center Begins New Era in Disney Entertainment” *Epcot Center News*, https://www.disneydocs.net/files/ugd/5db718_f57a8b7b47ec41d3b4cff123301e0195.pdf, 1.

years following. Whether this is because they realized they did not want to market the park as a world's fair, not willing to compete for an audience considering the fairs were still being presented around the globe, or they simply decided to use different phrasing, it is an interesting change to note. Despite the shift of the official narrative, analyzing Epcot Center as a permanent world's fair is important because of the similarities still seen throughout the park.

Epcot Center was modeled after Walt Disney's proposed "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow"³⁰ prior to his death in 1966. Included in the 1982 Walt Disney Production Annual Report, a brief description of this idea states, "He visualized a community where the best ideas of industry from around the world would be on permanent display: a sort of living laboratory of creativity that would always be changing."³¹ In fact, a film created by the Walt Disney Company, usually referred to as the *Epcot/Florida Film* (1966) recorded just a few weeks prior to the death of Walt Disney, provides the description of the space from the man himself. In this film, Disney discusses the proposed areas of Walt Disney World in Florida. He mentions the amount of land: an "airport of the future," an entrance area, industrial area, as well as the theme park area itself, connected by rapid transportation systems. He then says, "The most exciting, by far the most important part of our Florida project, in fact the heart of everything we'll be doing in Disney World, will be our Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow. We call it EPCOT."³² Another statement made that leads toward the "world's fair" influence is, "Epcot will always be a showcase to the world for the ingenuity and imagination of American free enterprise." The death of Walt Disney removed the possibility of this community being created

³⁰ Harry Trimborn. "Wizard of Fantasy Walt Disney Dies" *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 1966. <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/archives/la-me-walt-disney-19661216-story.html>.

³¹ Walt Disney Company "Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1982" <https://archive.org/details/wdp-annual-report-1982/page/n1/mode/2up>.

³² "Walt Disney's E.P.C.O.T Film (1966)" YouTube Video, September 23, 2013, 25:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLCHg9mUBag&t=4s>.

as WED Enterprises were focused on building Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom and finding what the company would become without the man who led them. These plans were thinking far into the future and technologies that would later become available later, but not at the time to make this version of EPCOT work.

This vision was seen as a community which would uphold positive ideology on human achievements. Disney himself said, "Epcot will take its cue from the new ideas and technologies that are now emerging from the creative centers of America," going on to say, "it will be a community of tomorrow that will never be completed, but will always be introducing, and testing, and demonstrating new materials and systems."³³ While his idea never came to fruition in the way he presented it, it is safe to say that the general concept of the futuristic community is shown through the exhibits on progress, and the continued idea that the park will never be completed.

Epcot Center offered guests two main areas of entertainment, in a manner that mirrored the New York World's Fair layout—Future World and World Showcase. Evoking Disney's original vision, Future World was built to exhibit the latest technology as well as technology of the future. It was positioned at the front of the park. Spaceship Earth, the largest attraction and symbol of the park, was situated at the main entrance, providing a grand entrance to the futuristic area. The photo shop and Gateway Gifts were located underneath this ride, as well as guest relations, creating a center for all guests within the ride.³⁴ The other rides and attractions in this area would play on the idea of the future as well.

³³ Walt Disney's E.P.C.O.T Film (1966)" YouTube Video, September 23, 2013, 25:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLCHg9mUBag&t=4s>.

³⁴ *Walt Disney World EPCOT Center: Nomenclature and Style Guide*, WDW Enterprises. May 6, 1982. https://www.disneydocs.net/files/ugd/5db718_0b875a96406e4bc4a103b184e3d1dc11.pdf, 18.

World Showcase Featured a number of pavilions from countries around the world, offering guests a chance to be “world travelers” and experience the unique food, culture, and entertainment of each, paralleling visitor experiences of the Pike and Midway at the St. Louis and Chicago world’s fairs. Guests could dine on “authentic” cuisine, shop for unique gifts from the countries they “visited,” and sometimes watch shows or bump into entertainment on the streets. They could shop for sweets specific to each country, view films, and go on the various attractions that were located in each area.

While many attractions in Walt Disney World did have sponsors to aid in their creation, similar to exhibits at the world’s fairs, the Epcot Center pavilions are void of these—minus the American Adventure pavilion. This pavilion was presented by Coca-Cola and American Express, and presented a show of “audio-animatronic” figures from American history.³⁵ Other attractions in the Future World area of the park included sponsors as well: Journey Into Imagination was presented by Kodak, The Land was presented by Kraft, World of Motion was presented by General Motors, and so on.³⁶ This could be due to the trouble of gaining permission from countries to collaborate with sponsors in the pavilions, but is not discussed within annual reports or other documentation.

Also included in the 1982 Annual Report are mentions of educational media tied to Epcot Center—commodification of the Epcot experience within months of its opening. The report states, “In the near future, the division will introduce the Epcot Educational Media Program derived from the pavilions and showplaces at Epcot Center,” with planned computer games and

³⁵ Walt Disney Company “Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1982” <https://archive.org/details/wdp-annual-report-1982/page/n1/mode/2up>, 20.

³⁶ Walt Disney Company “Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1982” <https://archive.org/details/wdp-annual-report-1982/page/n1/mode/2up>, 9-11.

simulations, films, and kits that focused on the themes presented throughout the park.³⁷ The problem with this idea is that the Disney company might be presenting the pavilions of these countries, but they were not experts on their histories or cultures—as seen in the representations of “authenticity” already presented. The Disney Company would end up providing educational materials for the park, capitalizing on the way that education was at the center of the new technology, The Land and Sea pavilions, and the World Showcase. There were field trip materials that classes could be quizzed on after their trips to Epcot, video materials that could be used in the classroom, and other educational materials that Disney would later release based on the success from their Epcot series.

One Classroom Guide “The EPCOT Center Experience” provides teaching guides for grades 3-12, split into Level A (Grades 3-6), Level B (Grades 7-9), and Level C (Grades 10-12).³⁸ Activities are based around four rides: Spaceship Earth, Universe of Energy, Horizons, and The Land. These activities include lesson plans, stories, reading comprehension worksheets, and activities to do in the classroom. This would allow teachers to use Epcot Center as a teaching tool even if they were not at the park. As mentioned previously in the case of using the World Showcase as educational material—the Disney Company might have done research on these aspects of the park, but are not experts in each of these fields, therefore teaching materials feel a bit odd to see from the parks. This truly plays into the commodification and consumerism represented in the park, and solidifies the idea of “authenticity” due to the representation of their exhibition as truth in the classroom, no matter how accurate their work might be.

³⁷ Walt Disney Company “Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1982” <https://archive.org/details/wdp-annual-report-1982/page/n1/mode/2up>, 27.

³⁸ *Classroom Guide: The EPCOT Center Experience*, https://www.disneydocs.net/files/ugd/5db718_db6dc3bc53e5417190aab2ce3b8d4d64.pdf, 2.

The 1983 Annual Report begins with recognizing the increase in tourist visitation to Walt Disney World due to Epcot Center becoming an “international landmark, a magnet for tourists beyond compare.”³⁹ They saw growth from just above 12 million in attendance to nearly 23 million within the year. Also discussed in this report is a continuation of Epcot as educational material—a new “Epcot Teacher’s Center” was created for outreach, and eleven films were released through the “Epcot Educational Media” program due to its success.⁴⁰

An employee guide titled *The Spirit of Epcot Center* provides a closer look into the expectation of those who worked in either side of the park. World Showcase “illustrates man and his world today, and serves as a dramatic symbol of international understanding and cooperation.”⁴¹ At the time of publication, the guide states “as time goes on, World Showcase will become more and more diverse, welcoming a wealth of countries, and cultures into its family of nations,” which currently planned on “Equatorial Africa, Israel, Venezuela, Spain, and Morocco”

The idea of “authenticity” is a large aspect of the offerings of Epcot Center, from the dining options, to shopping, to entertainment. To provide an example of what one might see in each of these individual pavilions, the Mexico pavilion is a good place to start as it includes a ride, dining opportunity, and souvenir shop. A merchandise guide to Epcot introduces the Mexico pavilion as, “Entering a majestic pyramid, the gateway to Mexico, guests discover a festive marketplace...to preserve the look and flavor of the marketplace, our retail locations have

³⁹ *Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1983*, Walt Disney Company, https://www.disneydocs.net/files/ugd/5db718_9fc497c16b924bf39a423efac62d5558.pdf, 1.

⁴⁰ *Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1983*, Walt Disney Company, https://www.disneydocs.net/files/ugd/5db718_9fc497c16b924bf39a423efac62d5558.pdf, 26.

⁴¹ *The Spirit of EPCOT*, Walt Disney Company, 1982, https://www.disneydocs.net/files/ugd/5db718_a8114fe414a5475eb0561104fcefae9c.pdf.

a very temporary look to them,” therefore the first impressions meant to be taken from this area are a less modern, and more authentic visit to merchandise stands.⁴² The guide continues to explain the story meant to be received from the pavilion’s merchandise area, and describing the “unusual craft” that is on display, which would be sold by townspeople in Mexico. Also in this pavilion was a boat ride throughout Mexico and a restaurant with “authentic” Mexican food. This pavilion is not the largest on the property, and these three pieces to the attraction can be easily accessed from one area to the next. Many other pavilions are set up the same, providing a way to view the performative “authenticity,” the othering of aspects of the culture as “unusual” or intriguing, and purchase goods and a meal, participating in the consumerist aspect of the park.

Epcot Center’s authenticity would not be complete without individuals who were truly from the countries represented, therefore, “every effort has been made to staff the onstage areas of World Showcase authentically. In addition...contributes to the cultural richness of each pavilion by providing guests with the opportunity to meet people directly from each country.”⁴³ There is a commodification of the encounter in the phrasing “providing guests with the opportunity” as if it is the sole reason for cast members from the represented countries to allow guests to see them. This plays into the aspect of the “other” at the world’s fair as the wording makes it seem as if these cast members themselves are on display rather than simply working for the company and allowing guests to view their culture.

The idea of “traveling the world” is used to make it appear that the visitor to Epcot is simply able to take in each of the represented countries in a similar way they might visit the

⁴² *The Spirit of EPCOT*, Walt Disney Company, 1982, https://www.disneydocs.net/files/ugd/5db718_a8114fe414a5475eb0561104fcef9c.pdf, 10.

⁴³ *The Spirit of EPCOT*, Walt Disney Company, 1982, https://www.disneydocs.net/files/ugd/5db718_a8114fe414a5475eb0561104fcef9c.pdf, 13.

actual locations. A souvenir film of Epcot Center states “Here, everyone is a world traveler. You can go from Europe, to Asia, and back again in the course of a single afternoon.”⁴⁴ This creates an interesting dynamic as the experience is commodified—the price of a Disney World vacation could likely cost just as much as visiting the actual countries presented, though the visitor chooses to visit them this way.

The World Showcase includes many interesting countries and offerings, as seen through the Mexico pavilion, but also includes one that does not necessarily fit with the rest: the American Pavilion. This is an interesting inclusion to this area of the park, because nothing of the sort appears in the previously discussed world’s fairs. There were state pavilions present, but not a large pavilion dedicated to the United States as the host country in the same way that other countries were presented. The ability to present “American” cuisine is likely a large part of this, but there is also a show, “America Sings” as well as other singers and an exhibit.

While the world’s fair exhibits at the Columbian Exposition, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, and the New York World’s Fair were often priced per admission, Epcot Center, as a Walt Disney World Park, is one simple fee. These ticket costs are obviously part of the consumerist analysis, but are contributions to the commodification of being a “world traveler” in Epcot Center. Guests at the park are choosing to purchase tickets to this experience rather than becoming true world travelers and visiting various places around the world. This is likely due to the audience already visiting Disney World—those who are visiting want to visit each of the parks and be part of the “happiest place on earth,” and are not necessarily visiting to be able to call themselves “world travelers.” While this is the case, guests are still receiving the experience

⁴⁴ “Epcot Center: A Souvenir Program” YouTube Video, 21:59, August 10, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGPCqQYLw5A>.

even if it is not their intention, likely experiencing the “authentic” cultures without thinking about the true “authenticity” of it all.

An Epcot Center merchandise guide for World Showcase discusses the importance of merchandise display and relation to the area it is in. Here there is some insight into where this merchandise comes from, reading, “all of the merchandise for World Showcase is imported from the country of origin,” meaning that around the time of the park’s opening, these items were possibly authentic. It goes on to state, “when our buyers set out to find merchandise for World Showcase, they had one goal in mind—to find authentic merchandise from each country.”⁴⁵ Through these statements, one can assume that authenticity was the goal, though it is unknown whether these items were discussed with those from the country they were purchasing for or were just bought with tourism consumers in mind. It is also interesting to view throughout this guide the ways that displays are meant to be set up and how they are meant to be viewed. Some of these shops even included artifacts within their displays. These “authentic” items and their marketing toward consumers is seen similarly in the World’s Fairs. Street bazaars were often represented in the “Oriental” areas of the fair, making their own version of an authentically marketed experience.

Modern Epcot

In the most recent Epcot news, an Epcot overhaul has begun. In 2019 the Walt Disney Company announced that Future World would be split into new sections called “neighborhoods.” The Covid-19 pandemic has slowed the progress on this overhaul and many of these proposed

⁴⁵ “Merchandise: Walt Disney World Epcot Center” *Walt Disney Productions*, 1982: 2.
https://www.disneydocs.net/files/ugd/5db718_12e89e1bec70478db9cd937667b6e542.pdf.

projects have quietly died with no announcements made within the past two years on their status, though the original press release stated, Beginning October 1, 2021, “Epcot will be unified with four neighborhoods that each speak to important aspects of the world and its people.”⁴⁶ These neighborhoods include World Discovery, World Celebration, World Nature, and include the unchanged World Showcase. This decision does not necessarily change much in thinking about the aspects of the world’s fair, as the Discovery, Celebration, and Nature “neighborhoods” seem to be more secluded from World Showcase, and are also stated to be “rooted in authenticity in innovation,” two things which are tied back to the “authentic” fair experience.

There have also been many changes to the Future World section of the park since its creation, likely bringing many of the changes to the name. Future World is not as geared toward the future as it once was due to the rapidly advancing technology in the modern day, therefore the name change makes sense. It is true that one can still experience the newest technology in the new rides put in these spaces, but there are not new technologies exhibited like computers and games, touchscreens, and more. While the park still has areas such as The Land, The Living Seas, as well as Journey Into Imagination With Figment, the park’s educational aspect seems to have declined as other attractions have been created which deal less with innovation and more with characters from recent Disney movies. The future still plays a large role in the park, but is no longer the main focus. New technology is presented through the innovative ride systems rather than literal technology that can be seen up close and experienced hands-on with items like computers and games, touchscreens, and more.

⁴⁶ Jeremy Schoolfield. “New Details Revealed for the Historic Transformation of Epcot Underway at Walt Disney World Resort,” *Walt Disney World Resort: Disney Parks Blog*, August 25, 2019. <https://disneyparks.disney.go.com/blog/2019/08/new-details-revealed-for-the-historic-transformation-of-epcot-underway-at-walt-disney-world-resort/>.

Changes originally announced for the World Showcase were within the United Kingdom, France, Canada, and China pavilions, though only one of these has come to fruition since the announcement. A ride featuring Remy from *Ratatouille* would be placed in France along with a new restaurant, La Crêperie de Paris and the inclusion of music from *Beauty and the Beast* in the movie already within the France pavilion. New 360-degree films were to be placed in China and Canada. Finally, a *Mary Poppins* attraction would be added into the United Kingdom pavilion.⁴⁷ These changes are not anything entirely different from what is included in other pavilions around the World Showcase, therefore does not truly change much within this area of the park.

Epcot Center continues the performative, “othering” or orientalist, and consumerist traditions that were established at the World’s Fair. The reason for many to continue the legacy of World’s Fairs is summed up well in a book published after the St. Louis Exposition, *History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition*. The book begins with an excerpt from a speech given during the Pan-American Exposition of 1901, “Expositions are the time-keepers of progress. They record the world’s advancement. They stimulate the energy, enterprise, and intellect of the people, and quicken human genius...Every exposition, great or small, has helped to some onward step.”⁴⁸ This wish for peacefulness alongside the ideas of achievement and ambition are hopes that many hold onto throughout time, and with World’s Fairs, this progress is seen immediately in front of an audience, inspiring many who experience it.

Epcot will continue through an interesting transition where the company will again try to redefine what the park represents. While few changes occur in the World Showcase area of the

⁴⁷ Schoolfield, “New Details Revealed for the Historic Transformation of Epcot Underway at Walt Disney World Resort.”

⁴⁸ Mark Bennitt, et al. *History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition*. St. Louis: Universal Exposition Publishing Company, 1905: 2. <https://mdh.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/muellis/id/5362/rec/56>.

park, the theme of the “permanent world’s fair” persists. The creation of the “neighborhoods” in the park rather than the simple separation of Future World and World Showcase seems to separate the World Showcase even more from the “Discovery,” “Celebration,” and “Nature” representation that will be created. Through the unique representations of various countries in World Showcase, separation from the innovation in Future World, and commodification of the “world traveler” experience in presenting “authentic” spaces, Epcot Center continued the World’s Fair tradition of “othering,” performativity, and consumerism presented in the world’s fairs throughout time. The 1983 Columbian Exposition, 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, and 1964 New York World’s Fair help to show where these experiences were established, and how they were transformed through the Walt Disney Company in Epcot.

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