

CELEBRATION: Perspective and virtual happiness

In response to growing concerns related to its devouring urban sprawl, America is seeing the emergence of an interdisciplinary movement, ranging from within the medical, social, environmental and urban planning sciences to determine the means to sustainable growth. They propose alternatives which have either proved successful in the past or are currently being engineered, pioneering as well as accelerating the development of what is now identified as New Urbanism. It is generally accepted that the situation today is a sequel to the car culture and its breeding ground, the highway framework. Its unrelenting expansion has been made possible through various factors such as a liberal development of the industrial sector for over 50 years and the impact associated to a growing and informed population whose increasing demands are supported by financial muscle. The American population surged during the baby-boom in the 1950s and has kept growing, although slowly, until the 1980s with a distinct rebound in the 1990s⁽¹⁾. Demand for goods, for the same period, has grown exponentially.

New urbanism condemns the way cities, towns and residential/industrial areas have expanded in the United States, reconsidering the relationship between man and space. Concrete measures have been taken with, for example, the implementation of steps leading to the repopulation of decaying city centres coupled with the conservation and listing of landmark sites/buildings, the revitalisation of neglected (sub)urban space instead of building on new land, coupled with the protection of farmland and open space, the development of affordable housing to restrain speculation, and, in particular, the attempt at restoring civic sense and community values, which retrospectively are considered to have been effective in sustaining and promoting social cohesion. A little more than ten years ago, this last point became central to Disney's strategy when Celebration's embryo found its way into their laboratories and matured into a real estate venture.

Much more than creating an idyllic suburb from a cluster of dream homes interconnected to the information technology superstructure, Celebration was engineered to replicate, including the patina of time, the bucolic image of a traditional American small town, legacy of successive generations and memorial to the American Dream. It was modelled on traditional downtowns and the "Main Street", principal artery of the famous theme parks where the frontiers between fantasy and reality are blurred. Promenades and avenues stretch out and display neatly manicured lawns with their fluorescent green contrasting sharply against the immaculate facades. The most opulent mirror the grand houses of former plantation estates, like those of the Deep South, whilst the more modest, multi-unit dwellings, exhibit porticos and wrapped-around balconies encasing polymer stucco with the dual function of protecting the walls from moisture whilst emblazoning colonial design. Originals, unfortunately, are left to dissolve on Bourbon Street and the French Quarter in New Orleans. The community is divided into several point of focus featuring a more than real creek, a golf clubhouse and several manmade lakes, all engineered to harvest and reproduce real fauna & flora. The movie house remains a major landmark profiling its twin art deco towers in the distance, pseudo-visions of the past, illuminating the heart of the village at night with bright neon lights just as in a vintage American postcard.

The price to pay for all this bliss, however, is twofold: an inflation of at least 30% above the neighbouring real estate values and a long list of contracted rules that Disney imposes on Celebration's residents so that the picture of perfect happiness can be maintained.

(1) *Source: The Economist*