

Walt Disney's Dream: From Disneyland to the Future
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Walt Disney World, also known as “The Happiest Place on Earth,” is one of the most popular family vacation destinations in the world. Cinderella Castle is said to be the most photographed man-made structure in history.¹ Every year, Disney’s annual revenue exceeds \$35 billion. The Walt Disney Company owns, among other things, eleven theme parks around the globe, two water parks, and thirty nine hotels.² Disneyland in California and Disney World in Florida have been successfully entertaining guests for over 50 years. Many companies wonder how Disney is able to bring back guests time after time. Disney owes its success to the amazing attention to detail used to create an experience that can be enjoyed by both children and adults. The decision to create this experience has been a long and conscious one from the day Walt Disney first conceived of Disneyland to the present.

The idea for Disneyland and all the other Disney theme parks are rooted on Sunday afternoons long ago when Walt Disney took his two young daughters, Diane and Sharon, to different amusement parks in Southern California. Walt was rarely amused. The entertainment at these parks was only enjoyed by the smallest children. Walt sat on the sidelines, yawning, with the other bored parents. As he wasted away his afternoons on different park benches, he wondered why there was no place where he could take his daughters and truly have a good time with them.³ These were the first sparks that would later grow into the Disney theme park empire.

Walt formulated his first thoughts for a “Mickey Mouse Park” in a memo written to his staff on August 31, 1948. In the memo, he described a very exciting new project for the Walt Disney Company. It would be an amusement park for children and adults alike. The memo painted a picture of a small American town built around a midway with attractions that would appeal to the entire family. His first model, and every model thereafter, included a train circling around the outside of the park. There would also be a town hall, fire department, and a jail with real-life characters in it. Other attractions would be colorful and attractive food stands and restaurants with special rooms for birthday parties. Visitors could take a horse-drawn streetcar to a Western village and buy cowboy items at the general store or see a movie in the Western theater. Surreys would transport people into a carnival section that aimed to please the entire family with roller coasters and merry go rounds. Walt’s early ideas also mentioned places to rest with plenty of shade and drinking fountains.⁴

He proposed that his company, Disney Productions, build such a park across the street from his animation studio on an eleven acre plot he owned. He was convinced that the many people who visited him in his studio would love going to the new amusement park nearby. Surely visitors wanted to see more than just the back of an animator’s head leaning over his desk. These ideas were quickly discouraged by his brother Roy Disney.⁵ Roy tried to talk his brother out of the idea of an amusement park because they were already deeply in debt from several animated movie flops. One successful Disney movie would be followed by several failures that often dragged the company deeper into debt. If the Walt Disney Company did produce a successful film, the profits needed to go right back into the company.⁶ Roy knew that it would be hard to get money to fund such a risky idea since the company already owed several million

dollars to the Bank of America. But all efforts to remove the idea from Walt's mind failed, and plans started to unfold for the park that he now called Disneyland.

Once he had a name for the park, Walt Disney needed to work on financing. He founded Walt Disney, Incorporated in December 1952. His brother Roy would later convince him to change the company's name to WED Enterprises. Roy feared stockholders would be opposed to the use of the Walt Disney name and thought it better to use Walt's initials instead.⁷ Walt agreed to the name change because he wanted to build Disneyland more than anything. He sold his vacation home in Palm Springs and borrowed on his life insurance to help finance his dream. He also asked studio workers to invest in Disneyland. Thankfully, most of his workers believed in the concept of Disneyland and were willing supporters.⁸ But this still wasn't enough money.

Walt soon thought of another way to raise money. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) had both been asking Walt to produce a television show for them. He finally agreed to create a one hour series for ABC called *Disneyland Story*. In the agreement, ABC promised to invest \$500,000 into Disneyland and give more loans up to \$4,500,000. ABC would thus be a 35% owner of the park. The first episode of Disney's new program aired on October 27, 1954 with Walt presenting the show himself. Each episode was inspired by one of the many different realms that would be a part of Disneyland. On the first show, Walt also promised the public a new type of entertainment park that would open in California in 1955.⁹

He sent out professionals from the Stanford Research Institute to find the best place to build the park. His ideas had already expanded beyond the 11-acre lot near his studio and he needed to find a different location. Some places would be too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter. Walt also wanted to keep away from the beaches because he did not want people

coming to Disneyland in bathing suits. He thought it would be tacky to see such a sight at his family friendly park. Harrison Price, the head of the research group, finally found a 160-acre orange grove in Anaheim. This seemed to be an ideal location because it would allow easy access from the Santa Ana Freeway.¹⁰

Although the date for opening Disneyland was already set, Walt took his time planning every detail of the park. He wanted people to feel satisfied that they had gotten their money's worth in the park. He did not want anyone thinking that they were being taken advantage of. Walt thoroughly studied how different amusement parks, carnivals, and zoos operated. He analyzed what was functional in other outdoor attractions as well as what did not work.¹¹ Visitors to other parks and attractions usually left exhausted at the end of the day. To prevent sore, tired feet, Walt decided that guests should be transported through the attractions. This would also help cut down on traffic jams from crowds walking through the park.¹²

The key to Walt's park would be its pleasant atmosphere with entertainment that could be enjoyed by everyone, not just the kids. He wanted to keep things "fresh." Walt's research group went around to different amusement parks in the United States and Europe and studied them. They noticed that most other parks had grown haphazardly without following any sort of pattern. Walt did not want this to happen at his own park. He liked the feeling of continuous growth, just like the smooth flow of his films. His park would have better transitions between the different parts. Freshly painted bright colors would also help to tie the architecture of Disneyland together.¹³

The construction of Disneyland started in August 1954, just 11 months before the planned grand opening on July 17, 1955. Walt had hired a landscaper who used colored rags to mark the trees he did not want torn down. Unfortunately, the bulldozer driver was color blind

and mistakenly removed all the trees.¹⁴ Even with problems like this, Main Street started to take shape. It would be the anchor of the park, and would serve both a functional and nostalgic purpose. For example, to create the illusion of a three story building, architects built the first floor 90% to scale so guests could enter and exit comfortably. The second story was 80% and the third was 60% to scale. The outcome was a visual treat that made visitors feel at home right away.¹⁵

Ignoring the advice of other park owners, Walt decided there would only be one entrance to Disneyland. He wanted every guest to have the same experience so they must all enter in the same way. Every guest would be drawn down Main Street to the hub by a “wienie.” A “wienie” was a large object that pulled the guests into the experience of the entire park. Sleeping Beauty’s Castle would draw people down to the hub. All the other parts or “lands” of the park would radiate out from the hub to cut down on walking. While standing in the hub, visitors would be able to see two more “wienies.” The gigantic Mark Twain Steamboat would be seen to the left, and to the right, Tomorrowland’s giant rocket would stand tall against the sky.¹⁶

No limits were set on the amount of money to be spent on the designing of Disneyland. Walt wanted quality, and he was willing to pay for it. When it came to purchasing, the company had two requirements: things had to be authentic to the time period and they had to be of good quality.¹⁷ Walt wanted everything to blend together to create the overall nostalgic mood of Disneyland. He even had attractive looking trash cans made in keeping with each of the different lands. No expense would be spared to totally submerge the guests into the experience of Disneyland. Fancy furniture in the park’s inexpensive restaurant would make a family feel good about the experience. Extra money was spent to move power lines out of view and pipe in water from an underground source so there would be no water tower eye sore. Walt even refused to

allow an administration building to be built because he wanted his employees to interact with the guests and not separate from them. Walt always wanted to give the crowds more.¹⁸

The deadline for the opening of Disneyland seemed impossible to meet, but Walt refused to postpone the event. Engineers worked feverishly to create quiet, maneuverable vehicles for the dark rides of Fantasyland. For the Peter Pan ride, a suspended car was built to create the effect of flying over London.¹⁹ However, the Rivers of America land was experiencing major problems. When the man-made river was filled with water, it immediately disappeared into the dry ground. Several attempts to keep the water above ground failed. A clay soil that formed a hard cement-like bottom for the river was finally discovered as the answer to the problem.²⁰

Walt would forever refer to the opening of Disneyland as “Black Sunday.” He was actually unaware of the terrible events that took place on that day until he read about them in the newspapers on the following morning. Walt had spent opening day being shuttled around the park while filming an upcoming television special. He was thus completely unaware of the problems. By all accounts, Disneyland appeared to be a failure. Tickets for the opening day had been invitation only and were given to those people involved in the construction of Disneyland, Disney studio workers, and the press. Many tickets had been counterfeited and distributed to the public allowing over 33,000 people into the park on opening day. The intense summer heat of California had softened the asphalt down Main Street causing women’s spiked heels to get stuck. Fantasyland was forced to shut down early when a gas leak was discovered. Throughout the park, angry adults pushed their children to the front of rides that were breaking down from the massive rush of people. The decks of the Mark Twain Steamboat flooded when too many people tried to board all at once. The restaurants and food stands were unprepared from the crush of visitors and ran out of food and drinks very early in the day. The press criticized Disney for

having too few water fountains in his parks. Due to the plumber's strike earlier that spring, Walt was forced to decide between more drinking fountains or more toilets and he had chosen toilets. He thought that people could always buy a drink from a food stand, but they were out of luck if there were not enough bathrooms.²¹

Still Walt refused to be discouraged by the negative press. Instead of accepting failure, he examined the problems and mistakes that had been made and spoke with his staff on how to handle things better. He worked to improve Disneyland and invited all the press back with their families.²² Walt worked extremely hard to make his park appealing for everyone. He would squat down in different areas of the park to observe things from a child's point of view.²³ Walt would say, "That's not good enough for them!" if he felt the quality of an attraction was too low.²⁴ Disneyland was closed to the public on Mondays and Tuesdays, and Walt usually spent this time trying to find ways to improve the park. A lot of time was spent training the guides of the Jungle Cruise boat ride. Every guest deserved the same experience, so the drivers must get the timing down perfectly. In 1959, Walt issued 6 million dollars to be put towards an overhaul of Tomorrowland.²⁵

Disney's efforts to improve his park soon paid off. Within just seven weeks of that tragic opening day, one million visitors had come to enjoy the park. That was 50% more than anticipated. Not only was attendance high, but guests were spending 30% more than expected.²⁶ More than 24,000 Mickey Mouse ear caps were sold every day to a demanding public.²⁷ Walt welcomed many famous guests to his park as well. President Sukarno of Indonesia was delighted by the Mark Twain steamboat. King Mohamed V of Morocco marveled at the realism of the Jungle Cruise. The Premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, wanted to visit the park during a visit to California. The Los Angeles police chief told Khrushchev that it would be

difficult to protect him in the huge crowds. Khrushchev made headlines for throwing a fit at being denied a visit to Disneyland.²⁸ The reputation of Disneyland was already famous around the world.

Even with his park a success, Walt still worked hard to make visitors feel like guests in his park, not customers. He and his wife Lily visited the park one evening to preview an upcoming exhibit. The assigned guard denied Walt and Lily entrance until Walt explained who he was. The guard then agreed that Walt could enter, but his wife had to stay outside. This inconsiderate treatment was not what Walt wanted for Disneyland. He decided the company would have to hire and train their own security team to uphold the courteous ways of Disneyland.²⁹

Walt was never afraid to spend extra time or extra money to make something better.³⁰ During the Christmas season of 1959, Walt decided the park would have a special parade. The park operating committee decided a holiday parade was unnecessary. They felt that the park was packed with guests so there was no need to spend the extra money on a parade. Walt strongly disagreed. “We can’t be satisfied, even though we’ll get the crowds at Christmastime. We’ve always got to give ‘em a little more. It’ll be worth the investment. If they ever stop coming, it’ll cost ten times that much to get ‘em back.”³¹

He continued to dream up new additions for Disneyland. Unfortunately he ran out of land quickly and was not able to make these changes. He was also concerned that he could only maintain the atmosphere of Disneyland while his guests were in the park. Tourist traps and gaudy restaurants crowded the streets around the park hoping to bank off Disneyland’s success. Walt said, “Believe me, if I ever built another Disneyland, I would make sure I could control the

class and the theme of the enterprises around it.” Walt felt the neon jungle surrounding Disneyland was taking away from the illusion he had worked so hard to create.³²

Disney finally got his chance for another Disneyland. One day an employee pointed out to him that Disneyland only reached people on the West coast. There were other parts of the country that could be reached by a new version of Disneyland.³³ Walt put this idea into motion in 1958 when he hired researchers to find the best location for a new Disneyland. It would be a much larger park somewhere in the Eastern United States where the weather was good year round. Researchers proposed the coast of Florida.³⁴ Walt didn’t want to be near the beaches or exposed to hurricanes so the researchers looked inland. Ocala was the first choice on the researcher’s list. Orlando was second. Walt ordered another evaluation and Orlando became the top choice because of its convenient location to Florida’s new highway.³⁵

The decision of where to build the new park was made in November 1963. Orlando would be home to the new Disneyland park and a potential “city of tomorrow.” The Florida project was pushed aside temporarily to focus on the New York World’s Fair during 1964-1965.³⁶ Walt put his “imagineers” to work producing new attractions for the World’s Fair. He thought the attractions could later be moved to Disneyland and continue entertaining guests for another five or ten years. General Motors, Ford, General Electric, and Pepsi-Cola all eagerly agreed to support the upcoming attractions.³⁷ Creating the four attractions for the fair seemed almost impossible, but the imagineers made the deadline. Walt was eager to see the public’s reactions to his creations.³⁸ “Progressland,” “It’s A Small World,” “Magic Skyway,” and the “Illinois Pavilion” were all successful venues at the fair. Three out of the four later became permanent additions to Disneyland.³⁹

Walt decided that his new park would include a resort that was twice the size of Manhattan.⁴⁰ Both he and his brother Roy knew they had to be extra quiet when purchasing property in Florida. Prices would sky rocket if word got out that Disney was looking for a new Disneyland. Roy and several Disney executives headed for Florida to start purchasing land. They registered under several false names in various hotels as they looked for parcels of land.⁴¹ Walt viewed the land from a helicopter to avoid being recognized. The company accumulated piece after piece of land, but Walt still insisted on more.⁴² News finally leaked to the public in 1965 and Walt decided it was time to announce the project to the world.⁴³

The company bought 150 times more land for Walt Disney World than for the original Disneyland. The land amounted to 27,500 acres. This would be enough space to create a complete vacation experience for entire families with recreational facilities, hotels, and a Magic Kingdom.⁴⁴ Walt was very active in the Florida project. He drew sketches and ideas on breakfast napkins and brought them to meetings. He spent a lot of time admiring the property from both helicopters and the ground.⁴⁵ He even used gas-filled balloons to test different elevation levels for the anticipated buildings.⁴⁶ Walt and his planning committee, consisting of Marv Davis and Joe Potter, decided that the Florida version of Disneyland would be the same as the one in California except for a few minor adjustments.⁴⁷ But Walt's real obsession with the Florida Project was his "City of Tomorrow." He wanted all scientific and technological advances to be a part of this futuristic city. Walt decided his city was more like an "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow." It would be called by its acronym, EPCOT.⁴⁸

Walt had long been interested in the betterment of mankind. He was very excited about the plans for Epcot. His "City of Tomorrow" would be a thriving showcase for cultural and educational exhibits. Always thinking about the future, Walt said, "When I see things I don't

like, I start thinking, why do they have to be like this and how can I improve them?"

Unfortunately, Walt's energy levels started to drop as he grew older.⁴⁹ Walt had suffered for much of his adult life from an old polo injury to his neck. It worsened as he grew older. X-rays taken by his doctors at UCLA showed calcification that would require surgery. Walt opted to wait on having the surgery until Disney World was completed.⁵⁰

However, Walt soon realized that he could not go on without the surgery. On October 29, 1966, he traveled to Williamsburg, Virginia to accept an award from the American Forestry Association for "outstanding service in conservation of American resources." After returning to California, the pain in his neck became so intense that Walt could barely use his legs. He also experienced shortness of breath.⁵¹ He finally went back to St. Joseph's Hospital in Burbank, California on Wednesday November 2 for testing. The X-rays came back with bad news. Walt had a lump in one of his lungs. Walt would have to undergo surgery on the upcoming Monday.⁵²

Sadly, the lump that had been discovered in Walt's left lung was found to be cancerous and required complete removal of the lung. The surgeon explained to the family that Walt had between six months and two years to live. This news was upsetting to the whole family, but Walt didn't want the public to hear about his illness. He even started making plans for the company to run without him. He passed on many of his duties to the people who had worked with him so closely for so many years. He also became less involved in the animation studio, but still kept busy with plans for Disney World and most especially Epcot.⁵³

It was soon clear that Walt was not doing as well as doctors had hoped. He grew weaker day by day. December 5, 1966 was Walt's 65th birthday, but he was too weak to celebrate. The evening of December 14, 1966 brought Walt and his brother Roy together for the last time. They

spent the whole night talking about Disney World and Epcot, which was now Walt's only interest. To everyone's surprise, Walt Disney died early the next morning.⁵⁴

Roy Disney was left in charge of the company after Walt's death. He quickly issued a statement to the public assuring them that the company would continue to run as Walt had intended. He said that his brother had spent his life creating quality entertainment and Roy intended to keep it that way. Even though he himself was 73 years old, Roy Disney took over the company and ordered the "Florida Project" to continue without hesitation. He also decided the resort would be called Walt Disney World in honor of its original "imagineer." Roy also decided after Walt Disney World opened that he would retire.⁵⁵

Five years after taking over the company, Roy could finally relax. Walt Disney World opened on October 1, 1971. Plans had been made to open the resort later in the normal vacation season to avoid large crowds. Huge crowds and their related problems had made Disneyland's opening a failure, and the company refused to allow a repeat. Fewer people would come in October, allowing any problems that occurred to be taken care of more efficiently.⁵⁶ The Magic Kingdom, the Polynesian Hotel, and the Contemporary Hotel opened to an excited and anxious public. The Magic Kingdom was designed just like the one in Anaheim. Twenty out of the twenty-three opening day attractions were inspired by the rides at Disneyland.⁵⁷ Main Street was the same turn-of-the-century American town. An ice cream parlor, cinema, and barber shop all added to the nostalgic feel. Different old time vehicles offered guests rides up and down Main Street.⁵⁸ Cinderella's Castle was constructed at the center of the Magic Kingdom, standing 180 feet high.⁵⁹ Guests enjoyed the romanticism of Frontierland, the lightheartedness of Fantasyland, the futuristic feel of Tomorrowland, the patriotism of Liberty Square, and the excitement of Adventureland.⁶⁰ The overall experience of a family's trip was enhanced by the Polynesian Hotel

and the Contemporary Hotel. The lobby of the Polynesian Hotel was overtaken by cascading waterfalls in a rainforest of lush, exotic flowers and plants.⁶¹ The A-frame design of the Contemporary Hotel allowed the sleek, futuristic Disney monorails to pass right through the fifth floor of the building.⁶² Within one year, 11 million guests had visited Walt Disney World. The resort had received more tourists than the United Kingdom, Austria, and Germany put together.⁶³ Two years after its opening, *Time* magazine would deem Walt Disney World as “America’s biggest tourist attraction.”⁶⁴

It wasn’t until 1982 that Walt’s original vision would be completed with the addition of Epcot. Epcot gave guests the chance to explore and discover the many wonders that make up the real world.⁶⁵ The park was divided into two main areas called Future World and World Showcase. Future World presented new technological advancements in areas such as agriculture, communications, and energy.⁶⁶ Disney joined forces with NASA and the United States Department of Agriculture and Energy to study new methods for growing plants without soil.⁶⁷ The Living with the Land attraction at Epcot was designed to showcase the different food production methods that were being explored. This boat ride would allow guests a look into Epcot’s experimental green houses to observe researchers testing the newest farming processes.⁶⁸ World Showcase encouraged guests to explore and discover new cultures from around the globe. The nine original pavilions of World Showcase were Mexico, China, Italy, America, Germany, Japan, France, Canada, and England. Ninety international cast members acted as “cultural representatives” to give World Showcase more authenticity.⁶⁹ The Walt Disney Company had hoped to add many more international pavilions to Epcot, but only two more countries joined since opening day. Morocco was added in 1984 followed by Norway in 1988.⁷⁰

The Walt Disney World Resort continued to expand long after the opening of Epcot. More hotels were built to accommodate the massive amount of visitors to the parks every year. Great detail was put into decorating each of the different themed hotels. A variety of uniquely designed hotels added to the overall experience of Disney World. Guests could stay anywhere from an African lodge overlooking a savannah of live animals to a 1940's seaside resort along a boardwalk.⁷¹ On May 1, 1989, the Disney-MGM Studios welcomed guests to experience the glitz and glam of 1940s Hollywood. Upon entering the park, guests immediately feel drawn in by the replica of Mann's Chinese Theatre at the end of Hollywood Boulevard. The Disney-MGM Studios gave guests an interactive behind-the-scenes look at animation, movies, and television.⁷² Downtown Disney, Pleasure Island, and the Marketplace offered fine dining, great shopping, and exciting nightlife to guests looking for something to do outside of the theme parks. Golf courses and water parks also added to the popularity of Walt Disney World. The fourth park, Disney's Animal Kingdom, opened on April 22, 1998.⁷³ Animal Kingdom was the largest of any of the Disney parks and was accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association.⁷⁴ Walt had always wanted live animals at Disneyland. Because animals tend to sleep in the day, animatronics had been used to give all guests the same experience.⁷⁵ Disney strongly emphasized that Animal Kingdom was a theme park and not a zoo. Over \$1 billion was put into creating a successful theme park that would also be a home for animals from around the world. Since opening in 1998, Animal Kingdom has continued to grow by adding new attractions to Asia, Africa, and Dinoland USA.⁷⁶

The success of Disneyland and Walt Disney World inspired the company to go international in the 1980s. Tokyo Disneyland opened on April 15, 1983 in Japan. This was the first park to open outside the United States. It was an instant success. A second theme park and

two official Disney hotels were later added to create a better experience for guests. Tokyo Disneyland, Tokyo DisneySea, the Ambassador Hotel, and the MiraCosta Hotel were joined by Ikspiari, a variation of the Downtown Disney shopping center, to create the overall experience of the Tokyo Disneyland Resort.⁷⁷ EuroDisney opened in Paris, France in 1992. Attendance on opening day was only half of what Disney had anticipated. The park was not as successful as the company had hoped it would be. A few years later, the company started to recover from the initial financial struggles and finally produced a profit. The name was changed from EuroDisney to Disneyland Paris in 1995. Expected park attendance was less than half and plans for an additional park were temporarily suspended. Several years later, Disneyland Paris began to recover from the rocky start. Plans for the new park resurfaced and the Walt Disney Studios was finally opened in 2002. A version of Walt Disney World's Downtown Disney was also added for the overall experience.⁷⁸ In 2005, Hong Kong Disneyland opened to a new international market. The park is the smallest of all the Disney theme parks, but is still growing. The next fifteen years hold plans for many expansions of Hong Kong Disneyland.⁷⁹

Today, Walt's vision for the Walt Disney Company has remained strong. All of the theme parks have been successful in entertaining families from around the world for several decades. Walt's original dreams for Disneyland, Walt Disney World, and Epcot have all become a reality today. Disney's attention to detail and the "always give 'em more" attitude has made the empire one of the top tourist destinations in the world. Despite the overwhelming success of the theme parks, Disney refuses to stop adding to the parks. Guests return frequently because of the constant additions and improvements made to the parks. Walt Disney was a creative, optimistic, fun-loving family man who revolutionized the entertainment industry forever. The Walt Disney

Company has changed the way people look at theme parks and has brought many families closer with a just a little bit of Disney magic.

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