

Celebration, Florida

1. Introduction

If you were to fly into Orlando airport in Florida, you would find, in a lower level of the airport, an area from which run many different ground transportation buses. Some of these go into Orlando itself. A number of others run to different areas round Walt Disney World Resort – for Disneyworld is built in what are, in effect, the suburbs of Orlando. And many, many visitors come there, from all over the United States and indeed the world. Disneyworld stretches across a huge area, and contains many different things for people to visit, and also many different hotels and stores, although there are also many other hotels, restaurants and gift shops outside it.

The area actually owned by Disney is vast, and this, it could be said, is no accident. For Disney's earlier effort to construct an entertainment complex, Disneyland, is in Anaheim, California. And while that had been successful, they hit a problem. Disney did not own all that much land. And the problem with that, was that a lot of the custom – and thus the profits – that could have been extracted from the visitors to Disneyland, went, instead, to businesses run by other people in the surrounding area. Disney were not willing to have this happen again, and they decided, when they wished to construct a comparable leisure area elsewhere, not to make the same mistake again. The result was that they ended up having different areas in Florida bidding against one another to get Disney to come there. While Disneyworld is attractive, those who like it might – a bit like with a sausage – not wish to enquire too closely as to how it was made.¹

Disney were able not only to obtain a huge quantity of land, but they also obtained striking powers over it. The area which they were granted was cut out from two of the counties on the outskirts of Orlando. Disney not only received the land, but also county-level powers over it. In addition – as I have enjoyed telling my Iranian friends – they were entitled not only to run their own airport, but also their own nuclear power station: something that the Americans thus seemed happy to have in the hands of Mickey Mouse, but not of the Iranian government. The Disney corporation was also able to arrange things such that the electorate for this large area consisted just of a relatively small number of company employees. I have set out this story, because it made possible something which I will be discussing in this piece: the Disney town of 'Celebration'.

Walt Disney, himself, had apparently had some ideas about the possibility of his Epcot Centre in Disneyworld being somewhere where people could live. This came to nothing. But the Disney Corporation revived this dream when they found that they owned an area of swampy land, cut off from the rest of the land which they were developing by a major road. They decided to develop this, as a town. What was distinctive about it, was that it was not planned as a 'company town', in the

¹ An interesting account is given in Richard E. Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001). See also, for a wide-ranging discussion of related issues, Fred Foldvary, *Public Goods and Private Communities* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1994); Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994); and Robert H. Nelson, *Private Neighborhoods* (Washington D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 2005). I would like to thank Professor Richard Shearmur for his comments on an earlier version.

sense of somewhere where its employees would live. Rather, it was designed as somewhere within which ordinary members of the public could choose to live. But there was an important difference between this, and other towns. This was, that it would be planned and run not by an elected city council, but by the company. Those living there would not be citizens, but customers.²

2. A Strange Idea?

This might seem a strange idea. But if one reflects upon it, it is not so peculiar. For example, many of us will have stayed in hotels. We do so as customers: we can see what is on offer, and will choose to stay if they will have us, and we can pay what they are asking for the use of the room and the 'public' facilities. (By this, I mean that we will, typically, have access to the lobby, to stairs and an elevator, and so on. There may also be other facilities which we can use, perhaps with a small additional charge, such as a pool or a gymnasium.) Two things are worth bearing in mind. The first, is that we and other guests don't get a say in what is provided. The hotel will typically offer certain facilities, and may – if it chooses to do so – meet additional requests that we might make. It might provide a refrigerator, or a heater. We may also be able to request if, for example, the hotel will ask other guests not to make so much noise. But all this is a matter of their discretion. The second thing, is that it is possible for people to live in a hotel. One typically thinks, here, of wealthy eccentrics who have lived for years in suites in expensive hotels. But some other people – e.g. elderly people who do not have a family – may also spend many years in such places.

A further step is offered by a resort hotel. This may offer not just a room, but, say, a cabin in grounds that are landscaped and serviced. These may be used for holidays. But it is also possible that people may choose to live in such a setting, permanently.³ It is now becoming not uncommon in the United States and Australia, for people to retire to such commercial 'communities'. Different people are likely to make different choices. They may like to have peace and quiet, or to be somewhere where 'community activities' are organised. They may choose to live somewhere which caters for particular pastimes or hobbies that they enjoy, such as golf. There are also communities which cater for other tastes – such as, say, retirement communities which cater for gay men or lesbians.⁴

It is also the case that there exist other forms of organisation for neighbourhoods, which stand between commercial resorts and more ordinary forms of political organisation. The most familiar situation, here, concerns blocks of apartments. When my wife and I initially moved to the United States, we lived in Northern Virginia. We rented an apartment. In addition to the apartment, we had the use – as is common in the U.S. – of common space in the basement of the building. There

² As I shall explain, this turned out only to be true during the period in which the town was being developed. U.S. tax laws – alas – ruled out such a structure being maintained indefinitely.

³ See also Spencer Heath MacCallum, *The Art of Community* (Menlo Park, CA: Institute for Humane Studies, 1970).

⁴ This U.S. website promises leads to such communities: <https://www.seniorliving.org/retirement/lgbt/>; compare also: 'Britain's first retirement homes for LGBT OAPs': <https://www.economist.com/britain/2019/06/22/britains-first-retirement-homes-for-lgbt-oaps>

we could use some washing machines and driers which were owned by the owners of the apartments, and also had some storage space allocated to us. Outside the apartments, there were some roads and landscaped gardens which were also owned and maintained by the owners of the apartments. They also set various rules about how we should behave, including when rubbish should be left out for collection.

We subsequently moved to a house which we bought, in an area called 'Danbury Forest'. We owned our house freehold. But in some ways the situation was similar to that in the apartment buildings. For the roads in the area, an outdoor swimming pool, and also land within the broad area in which the houses were situated, was owned by a corporation, which had been set up by the builder of the houses, in which each householder was a shareholder. This 'residents' association' charged everybody a fee each year, which went to pay for the maintenance of the roads, of the pool, and also of the shared land. In addition, the residents' association made various rules. It stipulated what colours houses could be painted, set out rules for parking, specified when rubbish could be placed outside houses for collection, and was also responsible for arranging with private contractors when – and how much – rubbish would be collected. It also laid down rules about the maintenance of property, so that when, for example, we came to sell our house, the residents' association required that we replace an old wooden fence, the condition of which they thought was inadequate. They were able, under the terms of the residents' association – which everyone had to join, when they purchased a house in the area – to take legal action to enforce their judgements. Similar kinds of arrangements were to be found in other residential neighbourhoods. While, not all that far away from where we were living, there was Reston.⁵ This was a planned, private residential development, now of some 60,000 people, influenced by the 'garden city' movement. It set out to combine the creation of a community, with cultural and recreational facilities, open space and wildlife areas. Basic services are provided by the local government (Fairfax County) within which Reston is situated, but there are also fees paid to Reston Association for the maintenance of parks, recreational facilities etc, and also, on a local basis, fees paid to residents' associations within each particular residential area.

3. What of Celebration?

As I have indicated, Celebration is not as strange in the context of the United States as it might seem elsewhere, just because people may well be more used to services which in other countries are provided by local government, being provided by corporate bodies or by commercial associations. Celebration, however, is distinctive, both because of the role played by Disney, and also by how they went about what they were doing. There was an influence, on how it was developed, from the ideas of the 'New Urbanism'. (An example of this is the town of Seaside, FL,⁶ which was used the setting for the film, 'The Truman Show'. That, however, was more of a holiday resort than somewhere residential. Celebration, while it is referred to as a town, is, in fact, really more of the character of a large suburban development (about 9,000 people) with added facilities, than a town.⁷)

⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reston,_Virginia

⁶ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seaside,_Florida

⁷ If comparisons are being made, one needs to think in terms of nearby suburban developments, rather than – as Ambe Njoh does in what seems to me a particularly silly paper, 'New Urbanism, an Alternative to

It was constructed on swampy land which was otherwise unusable by Disney. The land was split into a mixture of lakes, shopping and recreational developments, and housing. The housing is offered at a mixture of prices – the rates, when I checked the local newspaper when I was last there – seemed to be roughly comparable to what was available in nearby suburban developments. However, as compared to regular suburbs, the private space was relatively small, and the well-maintained public space large.

Accommodation was available in a range of forms – from modest town houses, to single-family homes (which sometimes also had small apartments above their garages), through to apartments, either in blocks, or placed above shops in the ‘downtown’ area. The housing is all of a certain style. Indeed, those buying houses there had to choose their houses from a ‘pattern book’. There were restrictions on the colours in which houses could be painted (compare Danbury Forest), and also on the colour of curtains that people could use. The lay-out of the town was also carefully designed. Disney had sent out employees to look at various towns in the United States which had the reputation of being particularly attractive to live, in. And ideas were drawn from these, and from its expertise in designing resorts, as a basis for the design of Celebration.⁸ These included having wide streets, lanes behind houses leading to garages and for the collection of rubbish, and an intermingling, in the downtown area, of stores and residential apartments placed above them. Design was also taken further: houses were positioned on lots so as to foster interaction between neighbours. What is crucial here, is that Disney were drawing on expert knowledge not known to the residents: this could be done more easily by a commercial rather than a democratic organisation.⁹

What was also striking about Celebration, was that there was, as a first move, investment in infrastructure. The centre of the town featured an architect-designed ‘town hall’¹⁰ and a Post Office. This area also featured an attractive cinema (with a family-friendly amusement arcade located underneath it), and a hotel. There is also a commercial area, which includes several attractive cafes and restaurants. By the side of the lake, there are palm trees, and there is also an area for children’s play, where water fountains, mounted in concrete, are activated when children run over them. They had also arranged with a Florida-based university to have them open an ‘extension’ in Celebration, where classes could be taught. They also built a church – different denominations had to explain as to why it should be them that was represented.¹¹ The downtown shopping area, on a street leading down to the lake, just consists of boutique-style shops. This street is also used for ‘festive’ occasions organised by the city. On one occasion when I was there, the street was cleared of traffic, and large quantities of sand were brought into it, on which children were able to play, as if on a beach. On

Traditional Urban Design: The Case of Celebration, Florida, USA’: <http://www.unhabitat.org/grhs/2009> - with housing provision in the state as a whole.

⁸ Compare, on this, Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

⁹ This combination of expertise plus consumer choice of membership a community that is designed to offer a particular way of life on the basis of knowledge that they don’t possess, suggests one partial approach to the problem that I have elsewhere called ‘Plato’s revenge’.

¹⁰ I have put this in quotes, because it was where the commercial company which ran the town was situated: there were, while the town was developing, no *elected* officials at all.

¹¹ Because Celebration is close to other suburbs, it is easy enough for people to get to services in other locations. An evangelical group and a Catholic church have now been built in Celebration, and a Jewish group meet there regularly.

another occasion, wind-making machines were brought in, and large quantities of coloured paper 'leaves' were blown around, which children were able to run round and catch. The area is genuinely pleasant, and, by contrast with the areas outside Celebration, is attractively free of commercial clutter. Even real estate agents could only advertise using small, tasteful signs outside houses. When I stayed there for a couple of nights in the hotel, I enjoyed eating at a local Irish pub, and then sitting on a bench overlooking the lake, watching people fishing. They, however, had to be careful, as there is a risk that their catch might be taken by alligators (this is, after all, Florida). On a previous visit, I walked round another lake in Celebration: there were small attractive notices to the public saying: don't feed the alligators. I wondered if there were comparable notices under the water saying, to the alligators, 'Don't eat people's dogs'.

The facilities in Celebration go well beyond what would be available in a comparable suburb or small town. At the same time, the town does not have basic facilities such as a large supermarket. The explanation for all this is that Celebration, while a place in which ordinary people live, is also on the Disneyworld tourist circuit. That is to say, people come to Celebration as part of tours of the Disney area, enjoy the facilities, shop and eat in the restaurants. This does not mean that the town, itself, is over-run with tourists; but it does enhance what is available for the townspeople. At the same time, there is – on the far side of the large lake from the town centre – a private country-club style park, which is open only to residents. Celebration itself (the entire town area is surrounded by a (plastic!) white picket fence), is separated from the main road by a golf course. Near the road, there was supposed to be a large supermarket; but, in the event, the land was sold off instead to rather unattractive low-rise commercial and office developments, although these are situated far enough from Celebration itself, and are sufficiently similar to the area around it, not to cause a problem. Residents can go elsewhere for supermarkets, large drug-stores, fast food, and the other basics of American suburban life.

I have referred, earlier, to the planning of the streets and the house lay-out in Celebration as drawing on what was thought to make life in the most attractive small towns in America work well. This was enhanced by the setting up of the Celebration Foundation. This was a small organization, funded by a levy on house sales, the task of which was to help people make life in Celebration attractive. As the town was starting up, it assisted with the formation of voluntary organisations – e.g. with how one goes about setting up a Scout group for young people. It also facilitated events. For example, when I first visited Celebration, there were adverts on the town's intranet for a 'Lemonade and Lights' evening. The Foundation had asked for volunteers who would open their homes to neighbours one evening, and signal that they were doing so by putting on all their lights. They served them lemonade, so that people could get to know one another.

You might think: this is the last place on Earth in which I would like to live. But that would be fine. For the whole point of Celebration was to try to design a town which, for those who wanted it, would offer – and, indeed, would set out systematically to try to produce – the experience of life in small-town America, but in a modern setting. It was, in effect, an attempt to offer a Norman Rockwell¹² experience, but with good internet connections, and with the facilities of other suburbs

¹² Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) was well-known especially for his idealistic or sentimentalized portrayals of American life, notably those which appeared for many years on the cover of *Saturday Evening Post*.

and a large city close at hand. It was something that attracted people who had enjoyed holidays at Disney World, where the family-friendly atmosphere was also something that was produced artificially. It was also, clearly, something that other people would not find attractive. When I visited, although I had the opportunity to talk about the town with an African-American resident who worked in a local real estate office, hers was the only black face that I then noticed. The town is currently 80% white, 13%, Hispanic, 4% Asian and about 1% Black or African.¹³ An academic who wrote his Ph.D. on Celebration, Andy Wood,¹⁴ suggested to me that a subtext to the town's appeal was 'safety' – which one might link with a lack of ethnic diversity, which has sometimes been argued to link to trust.¹⁵ Without further research, it would be difficult to judge what underlies this. It could be racism; it could be a matter of taste as between different ethnic groups (it is striking that visitors to nearby Disney World appear to fall into a similar pattern¹⁶).

4. Did All Go Well? Hardly!

The short answer is that, while there were some teething problems (notably with the use of an out-of-town construction company, and with a problematic decision to try out a 'progressive' school system, but within the local state-provided system),¹⁷ it initially seemed to have worn reasonably well. However, they encountered problems in the global financial crisis when the falling cost of housing led to people with no interest in what was distinctive about the town living there, and when mortgages were foreclosed and houses fell into the ownership of banks.¹⁸

Prior to the difficulties that came about from the financial crisis, I discovered, from talking with residents, that there were some other problems. One feature of Celebration which made it attractive, was the provision of boutique-style shops. These, however, seem only to have been viable, because, for an initial period, they were offered attractively low rental rates. It is my impression that, when this trial period came to an end, the owners found that they could not make a living in Celebration – which is understandable enough, given that just about everything is now available from suppliers with lower overheads, on the internet. The same problem seems to have hit some of the restaurants. This does not mean that there is empty commercial real estate, but it is

¹³ See [https://datausa.io/profile/geo/celebration-fl#:~:text=The%205%20largest%20ethnic%20groups,%2DHispanic%20\(0.996%25\)](https://datausa.io/profile/geo/celebration-fl#:~:text=The%205%20largest%20ethnic%20groups,%2DHispanic%20(0.996%25).).

¹⁴ Andy Wood, Ohio University 1996 Ph.D. thesis *Spaghetti Dinners and Fireflies in a Jar*.

¹⁵ Robert Putnam's 'E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30, 2007, pp. 137-74 might be cited here as suggesting that diversity leads to distrust; but see also Daisy Grewal, 'Does Diversity Create Distrust?', *Scientific American* 29th November, 2016:

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/does-diversity-create-distrust/>, and Gundi Knies et al, 'Life satisfaction, ethnicity and neighbourhoods: Is there an effect of neighbourhood ethnic composition on life satisfaction?', *Social Science Research* 60, November 2016, pp. 110-24:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X16302095>

¹⁶ See Antonia Cheatham's blog, 'Measuring Travel Behaviour at Walt Disney World', *Streetlight Data* September 6, 2018: <https://www.streetlightdata.com/measuring-travel-behavior-disney-world/>

¹⁷ See, for early reactions, Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins, *Celebration, USA* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), and Andrew Ross, *The Celebration Chronicles* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1999).

¹⁸ Personal conversation; see also Barbara Nefer, *Mickey Mouse is My Neighbor* (LifeSkills Press, 2013), which is updated at: <https://celebrationfl.blogspot.com/>. Construction-related problems, however, were ongoing – see <https://cookiekellyblog.com/>.

not clear that one could be sure of the kind of interesting mix of shops which makes Celebration attractive, if commercial rents are not subsidised on a long-term basis. The much-acclaimed cinema closed in 2010: it never made enough money from customers to be profitable, and complexities relating to arrangements after Disney pulled out, have meant that it is not clear if it will re-open.¹⁹

Another problem was that those buying in Celebration were too trusting of Disney: they expected that things would happen – and that other things, including other forms of development, would not take place - but did not have this as part of their contract with Disney. In the end, things seem to have taken a disastrous turn. In 2004, Disney sold²⁰ out to private equity company, which seems not to have had any commitment to the ideas behind Celebration. The degree of company control over the management of the place seems – in the view of some of the residents – then to have become a kind of prison, and it is reported that they found that they were not able to get repairs done to their apartments, and that the fabric of the town dissolved. The whole thing seems to have given rise to a massive lawsuit.²¹

The underlying issue, here, seems to me to have been that Celebration worked – for everybody – while the town was developing, and Disney were able to make a good return by selling off houses. But, as I understand it, the kind of structure that existed over that period (with a company, rather than an elected government in charge), was not feasible for the longer-term, for tax reasons.²² In addition, it is clear that people should not simply trust large corporations, and also that thought needs to be given to whether, within such arrangements, people should purchase freehold or leasehold (and what the conditions of the leases should then be). There are also other interesting questions. It is quite possible that even if everything had worked well, what had initially made Celebration look attractive might have seemed very different with the passage of time. But how are changes to be made? If people have bought into Celebration as it was, they are likely to be unhappy if radical changes are made. But if, say, everyone has to agree to changes, then the result may be a disaster, if things are highly problematic as they stand, but change has to be agreed by all, and one individual does not want to allow for change.²³

5. Conclusion

The Celebration story, at the time at which I write, seems to have hit significant problems. I am inclined to think that, in principle, these could be overcome, if better thought is given to the structures needed under which such ideas can be tried out, and which tie in, better, the interests of the company to those of the residents. The underlying theme, however, seems to me important. For it suggests one way in which ideas about the use of expert knowledge – as, in this case, those of the designers of the town – can be combined with individual choice. That is, to see individuals not as

¹⁹ See <https://www.businessinsider.com/disney-world-mystery-of-movie-theater-in-celebration-florida-being-closed-2018-3?r=US&IR=T>

²⁰ See on the background, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/16/us/disney-is-selling-a-town-it-built-to-reflect-the-past.html>

²¹ See, on this, Tarpley Hitt, 'Celebration, Florida: How Disney's "Community of Tomorrow" Became a Total Nightmare', <https://www.thedailybeast.com/celebration-florida-how-disneys-community-of-tomorrow-became-a-total-nightmare>, and also <https://cookiekellyblog.com/>

²² The issue here seems to be that the kind of arrangement under which shopping malls operate, does not work for residential developments, for reasons to do with US tax law.

²³ See Compare David Beito and Bruce Smith, 'The Formation of Urban Infrastructure Through Non-Governmental Planning: The Private Places of St. Louis, 1869-1920', *Journal of Urban History* 1990, pp. 263-303.

voters, or as purchasers on a piecemeal basis – as we might act in a supermarket – but, instead, as purchasing products of a large-scale character, such as the freehold or leasehold of a house, where this is subject to the kinds of regulations that one had in Celebration. (And where the relationship between the rules and the desired outcome, would not be obvious to the non-specialist). I will explore this kind of structure as a partial response to the problems of ‘Plato’s Revenge’, in a subsequent article.