Welcome to Progress City – Lessons in Story-Driven Community Design from Walt Disney’s EPCOT

Jared Wells
Carla Earhart

Ball State University

In 1966, Walt Disney fired the imaginations of the world when he unveiled his plans to build an Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow in Central Florida. Inspired by principles of the Garden City Movement, midcentury futurism, and his own placemaking lessons from Disneyland, EPCOT was Disney’s hypothesis to resolve the rampant urban blight of the 1960s. However, with their visionary founder’s passing shortly after the project’s unveiling, Walt Disney Productions pivoted plans for a prototype city to the well-known World’s Fair-style theme park that stands today.

Schematic plans for EPCOT remain the only evidence of what might have been had Walt Disney’s last dream been earnestly realized. While dramatic renderings of a radial industrial park, domed city center, multi-tiered transit system, and sprawling suburbia offer clues into what the city might have looked like, they fail to explicate exactly how residents would have lived there. Furthermore, the extant body of work does not nominally answer
how EPCOT would have helped address the salient societal quandaries of racial divide, exponential population growth, environmental entropy, or resource inequality.

Fifty-five years after EPCOT’s initial design, Western Civilization finds itself embroiled in the very same conflicts that inspired its inception. This presentation will examine how the basic structures of the Disney-planned city’s story-driven design stands up in today’s logistical, cultural, and technological milieus. Using this design criterion, it will infer answers to the many unanswered questions about life in EPCOT to develop a “resident experience plan” for a contemporary reimagining of the experimental city. The presentation will conclude with an examination of how story-driven, laboratory communities can tangibly stride toward the amelioration for the individual and human civilization at large, while avoiding the pitfalls of utopia.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

**Jared Wells** Jared Wells is an accomplished experience designer and writer from Orlando, FL. As a student at Ball State University, he designed and completed a new major program called Narrative Brand Promotions.

Upon graduation, Jared sought work in Orlando’s thriving themed entertainment community. His current body of work has encompassed everything from show scripts for theme park rides to design narratives for cruise port destinations to concept development for brand new communities. Currently, he is a writer and concept developer for the Disney-born experience and brand design firm **IDEAS**.

Jared is a fervent believer in story as a problem-solving paradigm. His work relies on proven narrative techniques like character development and worldbuilding to develop real-world design solutions. Whatever his project, he is a tireless advocate for people, always seeking to create experiences that address their physical, intellectual, and emotional needs.

In his burgeoning career, Jared has worked on projects in China, the Caribbean, Saudi Arabia, and all across the United States. Serving clients that range from Fortune 500 companies to fresh entrepreneurs, he has garnered experience across many industries, business models, and budgets.

**Carla Earhart** Carla Earhart is Professor of Residential Property Management (RPM) at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, USA. After earning graduate degrees in Housing from Oklahoma State University, she teaches courses in housing and property management in the Department of Applied Business Studies.

Much of Dr. Earhart’s teaching involves immersive learning, where RPM students complete real-world community-based projects. Recent projects have focused on Maplewood Mansion, a boutique apartment building used as an economic development partnership to attract more medical professionals to the city.
Dr. Earhart’s scholarly interests focus on attitudes and preferences toward housing options. She is especially interested in the influence of education, public policy, and the humanities on attitudes toward rental apartments. Her work has been presented at national and international conferences on housing, environmental design, family and consumer sciences, library science, sociology, hospitality, and business. Her work has been published in a variety of journals, books, magazines, and newspapers.

As a result of her work, Dr. Earhart has been recognized by the university and by a number of academic and professional organizations. She was awarded a regional Emmy nomination as executive producer, overseeing the student-produced documentary “Somewhere Called Home”.