



Theme Design vs. Architecture

By

**Peter Alexander
Totally Fun Company**

www.totallyfuncompany.com

So you want to design a theme entertainment project?

Okay, so where do you start?

You start by selecting an architect, right?

Well, not necessarily! Asking an architect to create a theme project is like asking a multiplex theater designer to direct a movie: you're putting the cart before the horse.

In a theme resort, store, restaurant or any themed entertainment project you are creating a "show," a three dimensional movie you can smell and feel. You are not creating a 'place' as architects do...you are creating sets, and populating them with actors, as in a film. In a theme entertainment project, the role of the actors is played by the visitors (called guests) and employees (called "the cast"). You enhance these actors' performances with props, special effects, lighting and theme architecture...the sum total of the experience is called "the show." The "show" is everything the guest sees, hears and experiences during his or her visit. The architecture can be seen as the "stage" upon which the "show" is performed.

Since theme design is about creating a "show," one of your first acts should be to select a "show designer." This "show designer" should be someone with proven experience in the theme design field. They will utilize design principles originally pioneered in the theme park industry to create your project. Whether the project is a resort hotel, restaurant, shopping center or theme park doesn't really matter. Regardless of the land use, it will be the show designer's job to create an environment that immerses the guest in an emotional experience. If they do their job well, your guests will be immersed inside a world that may intrigue, amuse, or even frighten them, but always entertains them; a world your guests will want to visit again and again.

So, what are the principles of theme design that your show designer will utilize to create this world? Well, there are too many to enumerate in one short article, but I can discuss a few, starting with the first stage of theme design, concept development.

Square One: Concept Development

Architects start with a phase known as "schematics." Theme design starts with a phase known as "concept development."

In schematics, the architect works with the client to develop a "program" (i.e. determining the building's functions and size) and then develops schematic drawings that show the layout and general appearance.

In theme design, we often start with no more than the thought that the project needs to be entertaining and should attract a certain number of people in a certain market. Sometimes the client will bring a basic "notion" to the show designer, other times we start with a blank page. The process of filling in the blank page is called concept development. We can fill that blank page with words, drawings, illustrations, plans, models or mock-ups or any combination of them, but when the concept is complete, the client will have an understanding of what the project is all about.

One of the major differences between theme design concept development and architectural schematics is the "invention factor."

In schematics, architects don't need to invent the building type, i.e. thousands of hospitals or office buildings already exist. However, in theme park concept development we sometimes need to invent some device or system just to make "the show" work.

For example, during the concept development for the Back To The Future Ride at Universal Studios, we needed to create a flying De Lorean, as featured in the movie. The idea to accomplish this was invented out of "blue sky:" I figured we would put a dozen or so De Loreans inside a large format, domed film theater, each De Lorean would ride on top of their own simulator motion base, and by cutting off the site-lines to the rest of the theater, guests inside each car would feel like they were flying. My boss (fearless Universal Executive Jay Stein) said, "That will never work. It's such a good idea, if it could work, someone would have thought of it already." Then Jay, who knew how to motivate his design team, bet me a thousand dollars it wouldn't work.

In order to prove out the idea (and get my thousand dollars), during concept development we made a foam core mock-up of a De Lorean Ride Vehicle, and took it to the Omnimax Dome at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. Even moments before the first test, my friend (and later, one of the producers of the ride) Craig Barr bet me an additional twenty dollars the "invention" wouldn't work. However, as soon as the lights went down and the film rolled, Craig put a twenty dollar bill in my outstretched palm. What we saw from inside the foam core mock-up was amazing. Just by cutting off site-lines and isolating our vehicle from the stationary parts of the theater, we produced the sensation of flying. I'm still waiting for that thousand dollars from Jay, but for

richer or poorer, we had invented a new ride system necessary to the development of that concept.

It was only after we were able to develop this "first of its kind" ride, and assure ourselves that it worked, that we were able to begin designing the actual BUILDING that housed the ride. Two things drove that process: the need to accommodate two eighty foot diameter Omnimax domes, and the need to break the guests up into groups of eight-the capacity of each De Lorean. What we ended up with was a futuristic building we called "The Doc Brown Institute" (after the crazy scientist in the film) that maximized efficiency in terms of loading the ride.

In summary, first we came up with the "show," then we designed the building in which to stage the show. Also, it's important to note that we developed a ride system necessary to the development of the concept, and not the other way around. In theme design, technology is created to help tell a story, while good stories are rarely, if ever, created by technology. Thus, the ride system invention flowed from the story, and not the other way around.

This raises an important question: what stories do we want tell in concept development? Are there any guidelines about what kinds of stories are best told in theme environments? Are there any lessons we have learned that might prevent your brainchild from turning into "Seed of Chuckie?"

Picking A Theme: The Tale of Too Many Smurfs

A few years ago, I was working with the Walibi Theme Park chain, which at that time owned a number of parks in Europe. We had helped improve the profits of a couple of their parks by applying our brand of theme park show design, so they asked me to come up with ideas to help the "dog" of the system, the one park that had never proven popular, the Smurf park near Metz, France.

The Smurfs, as you may recall, were little blue cartoon characters (Papa Smurf, Smurfette, Brainy Smurf, etc.) who were wildly popular back in the seventies. Unfortunately, the character's success on television had not translated into theme park attendance: only 700,000 guests had attended during the park's first year (1989) versus the projection of 1,800,000, and attendance had declined thereafter. By the time I got there, the park was virtually empty.

As I walked through the park with the General Manager I noticed something: everything was Smurf-themed. They even had a "Future Smurf" world, like Tomorrow Land, only filled with Futuristic Smurfs. When I first entered the park I kind of liked the Smurfs, but by the time I left, I was sick of them: they had too many Smurfs. "And if you don't like Smurfs," The General Manager said sadly, "You don't come to the park."

From that I learned a lesson: selecting a single theme for an entire park, resort, shopping complex or entertainment center can be risky. The best bet is to provide a variety of themes and thus appeal to the largest possible demographic. Disneyland is a good example. Walt could have themed the whole park to his cartoons, but instead he themed one land to Main Street USA,

another to the future, another to the American frontier, etc. The bottom line: if your project is of large enough scale, follow Walt's lead and try to include several themes.

Once you select your themes, you have created a roadmap which you use to explore the rides, shows, restaurants and shops that will make up a land, and from there, design both the buildings that house them and the "area development" or public spaces the guests will flow through to access them.

Picking A Theme: Brand In The Right Format

In the early nineties, Time Warner acquired the Six Flags chain, which then consisted of seven theme parks. At that time, the parks had gone through several owners and had been decreasing in value and attendance for years. While the parks had originally been designed as family adventures, the addition of roller coaster after roller coaster had turned them into teenage amusement zones, and as the families left, the revenues and the profits of the chain declined.

The new Time Warner-appointed Six Flags CEO, Bob Pittman, wanted to turn that around. Time Warner had just released the first Batman film, which had been a huge hit, and there were sequels in the offing, so I suggested we use Batman as the theme of several family-oriented attractions. I "pitched" a simulator ride and a stunt show, but it was the stunt show that excited Bob Pittman. "So you can get the pyrotechnics and the heat of the flames right in the audience's face, eh?" Bob asked excitedly.

I said yes, and about seven months later we opened the Batman Stunt Show in three theme parks. The impact on Six Flags was immediate and substantial. Attendance increased at all three parks, but more importantly, the stunt show format brought the families back to the parks, which increased the per capita spending, and turned the parks around. Bob Pittman told me later that the Batman Stunt Show had positively affected Six Flags success far more than the (more expensive) Batman (roller coaster) ride because the shows had changed the character of the parks and the demographics of the guests.

What we had done was pick the right intellectual property-Batman-for the right format-a stunt show. The lesson was this: if possible, "brand" your concept with a hot intellectual property (like Batman was in the 1990's) and utilize the brand in a format that will appeal to your demographic target.

From a design process standpoint, we started with an intellectual property, and then determined that an outdoor, arena stunt show would be the best use of that property. It's important to note that we did not say, "We need a stunt show," and then try to come up with some sort of subject for it: theme design flows from intellectual properties, not the other way around. So, as you develop your theme park's concept, and you want a stunt show in the mix, start by finding an intellectual property that would make a good one, then design your theater or arena around that idea.

Picking A Theme: The Entertaining Environment

When you are developing a theme concept, it's important not to get too full of yourself in the pursuit of creating "great art," but rather to remember you are creating entertainment that appeals to broad demographic groups. It's easy to design a monument...that turns into a monumental failure.

For example, shortly after the opening of National Maritime Center in Norfolk, Virginia, I got a call from the General Manager. He told me the project had been designed as an "Edu-tainment" facility, a combination of education and theme environment, but despite a healthy budget, they were not achieving their attendance goals.

As I drove up to the facility, I saw a massive, modern structure-painted the same gray as US Navy ships. It kind of reminded me of a big, beached aircraft carrier. I have an architectural book which describes this place, saying, "It escapes Disney-style literalism and succeeds in imposing itself...as a landmark."

Unfortunately, the imposing landmark wasn't drawing flies in terms of attendance. There were about fifty cars in the parking lot, most of them, I guessed, belonged to employees.

Inside, I saw some cool exhibits, including a shark "touch" tank where you could touch the fish, but the environment was cold and sterile: concrete floors, exposed steel roofs, muted colors, etc. No matter how clever and entertaining the exhibits, the sterility of the physical space made the place feel like a tomb. The designers had succeeded in designing a landmark, but in theme design, we are not designing landmarks, or monuments to ourselves or the owner. We are attempting to evoke emotional responses, just as is done in film and television. Just as in a film, our environments can evoke a sense of adventure, of comedy, of fear or risk, but never sterility or coldness. People are not going to sit through a two hour movie that leaves them cold, so why would they make a four to eight hour visit to an entertainment facility that does the same thing?

In architectural text books I've seen theme design referred to as "Populist Architecture" but it should really be called "Humanistic Architecture" because it is designed to elicit human emotional responses, and if you remember that in your concept design, you can't lose. Another way to put it: the architecture is part of the show, and needs to be as entertaining as the other creative elements.

Developing Your Theme: Show Design

Once you have your concept firmly in mind, it is time to move on into more detailed design. In architecture, following schematics, you enter design development, where you bring in the "disciplines" (structural, mechanical, electrical engineering, etc.), then move into construction documents where you draw the details. Theme design follows a similar pattern on the "facility" (i.e. building) side, but includes literally dozens of other "disciplines" necessary to create "the show," including script writing, ride design, show set design, costume design, lighting, special effects and many more.

It is these "show" disciplines that must take the lead, and often must be developed before the environment that houses them takes shape. There are, again, too many techniques that we use to

discuss in one article, but I can discuss a few examples, and share with you what made them work or not work as the case may be.

Developing Your Design: Forced Perspective

Forced perspective, originally developed by motion picture art directors, is commonly used to create theme environments. Probably its most famous example is Main Street at Disneyland. Walt Disney wanted Main Street to re-create the warm, comfortable feel of a small American town. His show designers accomplished this by reducing the scale of the buildings: full scale at street level, then three quarter to five eighths scale as you reach the second and third floors. The result: the guests feel "bigger" than normal, instinctively more in control and therefore more relaxed. Emotionally, Main Street serves as a safe and friendly transition between the often chaotic and imposing "outside world" and the fantasy adventures in the theme park beyond.

Forced perspective can also be used to make things that are small appear larger. An example would be the Eiffel Tower in the French Pavilion at Disney's EPCOT. The real Eiffel Tower is a thousand feet tall, while Disney's is about a hundred, but because it is placed at the end of a vista, with the view of its base blocked by building facades in the foreground, it appears to be more distant than it actually is, and therefore we accept what is actually a model as being the real thing. Emotionally, the "Eiffel tower in the distance" gives the French street the feel of the real Paris, where views of the landmark are common, without the expense of creating a full size replica.

Developing Your Design: The Fantasy Environment

Like motion picture sets, theme environments are designed to create the impression that the guests have traveled to a particular place and/or time. Movie sets are almost always in the background, with the actors, of course, in the foreground, so the sets must be somewhat extreme in their design, so that they instantly "read" as what they are, even though they are not the focus of the film. Similarly, theme facades and interiors are archetypes, and their ability to evoke the feeling of being somewhere or some time is more important than their architectural correctness.

For example, at one time we designed an "Ancient Rome" section of Universal Studios, Florida using these motion picture design principles. The lead designer, three-time Academy Award winning art director Henry Bumstead, called "Bummy" by his friends, designed one façade inspired by the ancient Roman Forum. However, rather than a literal recreation of the Forum, he used fluted columns and ornate, Corinthian capitals on top of the columns, as opposed to the simpler non-fluted Roman columns and less detailed capitals of the real Forum.

An architect friend of mine who was also working on the job looked at Bummy's design in horror and tried to point out the obvious "mistake." He suggested Bummy correct his "error" by using the simpler Roman columns. Bummy patiently explained the rationale for his design this way, "When the guests walk up to our Forum, we want him to feel like a Roman Senator. We want to take him back in time, and so we combine the most extreme elements from the classical period into one building. Most guests don't know Corinthian from Roman, nor do they care. But if we combine the "most classical" elements-the beautiful, ornate Corinthian capitals and the bolder

fluted columns—we make him feel like he's in ancient Rome, as he would imagine it to be. It's the feeling that counts, not the textbook architecture."

That is the essence of theme design: we are creating fantasy architecture that produces emotional responses, not attempting to recreate architectural styles brick for brick.

Developing a Theme: Find the Essence of the Brand

Often times you will be developing concepts based upon one or several brands or intellectual properties. If so, you must find the essence of the brand and then exploit it in a manner that is true to the brand.

For example, during the development of Universal Studios Florida, Steven Spielberg asked us to develop a theme attraction based on "E.T: The Extraterrestrial" that would be true to his film.

As you may recall, "E.T." was the story of a lonely boy who finds an alien literally in his back yard and helps to get the creature back to his home planet. It was a very personal story for director Steven Spielberg, and even the suburban, tract house setting near a redwood forest reminded me a lot of where Steven went to high school in Saratoga, California. Unfortunately, "relationship stories" like E.T. that rely on two-hour long films to create their emotional impact are not easily translated into six or eight minute theme park rides, so designing a ride or show that captured the essence of the film presented quite a challenge.

I started the design process by watching the "E.T." film over and over again, trying to figure out what would work as a theme park attraction. One section of the film stood out: Near the end, there was a great chase sequence where the little boy and his friends rescue E.T. from government agents and take him on their dirt bikes on a wild chase. At one point during the chase, E.T. uses his powers to cause the boys to "fly" over a government road block....

I thought this sequence could be made into a very cool ride, but it begged the question: where would the boys take E.T. once they took off? In the film, they landed in the redwood forest and bade goodbye to E.T., who then got into his spaceship and flew back to his home "The Green Planet." It seemed to me that we could "suspend disbelief" just a little more, and have the dirt bikes fly all the way to the Green Planet.

I presented this idea to Steven Spielberg verbally and he liked it, but gave me some great coaching. "Remember E.T. is a personal story," Steven said, "So at the end, the guests need a personal moment with him. And by the way, the Green Planet is a friendly place, not the usual scary, alien place."

I thought about how to achieve the "personal moment" and said, "What if he knows your name? What if E.T. knows everyone's name, and thanks them by name for bringing him home?"

Steven thought that would be great, so we then proceeded with the monumental task of developing a computer system that would recognize 20,000 names and allow our audio-animatronic E.T. to say each guest's name in the final scene.

All we then had to do was come up with a design for the Green Planet that was both alien, and friendly. To accomplish this, I looked at every science fiction film and book I could find. Not one of them provided an insight as to what a "friendly" alien planet might look like. Apparently, no one had ever attempted to design a "friendly" alien planet before. It struck me that maybe "friendly" alien planet" was an oxymoron-you couldn't use those words together.

Then I remembered that I had seen something that was both friendly an alien. When I was a kid I had surfed in California, and when the waves were flat my my friends and I had done a bit of diving. I always remembered thinking how the plants and coral rock formations on the ocean floor seemed like an alien landscape. I immediately collected some research on underwater plants, and gave them to our art directors as models for the "alien landscape" and with that simple inspiration, they went crazy designing the "friendly" "alien" Green Planet.

After we developed the ride's show, we were able to determine that it would be best housed in a "sound stage" facility, so the exterior architecture was very simple, but consistent with our Universal Studios "working movie studio theme" and appropriate for our park.

When Steven Spielberg first rode the E.T. Adventure Ride, as we called it, he told me that we had successfully combined the fun of "flying" on dirt bikes with a "personal moment" with an alien on his friendly home planet: capturing the essence of the "E.T." brand.

In summary, we started with the ride's "show" design, and then developed the facility to house it. Had we attempted the opposite and focused on developing a facility that communicated the "E.T." brand through it's exterior architecture, we would have used up all of the budget for the experience without providing the guests any entertainment.

Developing Your Concept: The Play's The Thing

When you are developing a theme area, remember that it is the entertainment or show elements that will make or break the attraction, and the environment should be designed to present them as strongly as possible, never leaving the "show" as an afterthought to the architecture.

As a recent example, we were asked to develop a design brief for architects to guide them in the development of a resort hotel themed after the home of the British Royal Family, Buckingham Palace.

When most people think of Buckingham Palace, they think of the Queen of England and the famous Changing of the Guard ceremony. Most people can't tell you what Buckingham Palace looks like, so the architecture-while still important-is less important than these "show" elements. Therefore, we asked the designers to develop the resort hotel based upon British Royalty and the

Guards, and to recreate the grandeur of what the average person might believe to be "royal" rather than to recreate the exact look of the palace.

For example, we suggested that guests might enjoy having "high tea" with the Queen, so a "tea room" to accommodate a large number of guests would be a "must." Since the "Changing of the Guard" ceremony was so important, we suggested that the courtyard in front of the hotel be graded to allow guests to get a good view. Finally, since the current Queen is just one of a long line of British Monarchs, we suggested that design elements within the hotel be devoted to other famous British Kings and Queens, everyone from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I to "Mad King George" to Queen Victoria, and so the interiors of different wings of the hotel were designed in schools of architecture reflecting those eras. We felt that the result would be a resort that people would want to return to again and again, partly for the fun of experiencing a different room themed to a different Monarch each time. As William Shakespeare once said, "The play's the thing," and theme design is best when that is kept in mind.

Developing Your Concept: The Budget: Beauty or Beast?

As a designer, you sometimes might think that a tight budget is your worst enemy, but sometimes it can be your best friend.

One example that comes to mind is the Land Pavilion at Disney's EPCOT. While it was in an early stage of design, the "facility" designer, a brilliant architect, told me, "I'm an artist. I cannot be bound by budgets, and I intend to put every kind of compound curve and difficult to build structure into this building." He succeeded in doing so, and we did not attempt to control him or limit his budget. Yet, when most guests visit EPCOT, "The Land" does not stand out as a great piece of "show" architecture, particularly not in comparison to the Imagination Pavilion next door, or to any of the World Showcase Pavilions. So, in this instance, having an unlimited budget did not enhance the "show value" of the project.

On the other hand, when we designed "King Kong: Kongfrontation" for Universal Studios Hollywood, we had a very tight budget, less than seven million dollars for the whole attraction, which by Disney standards was just about enough to design the front door and a bathroom. A lot of the budget went into the Kong figure, the special effects, and the "sliding bridge" which created the illusion that the big monkey was rocking the 88,000 pound Universal Super Tram back and forth. This left very little budget for the show sets, which were crucial if we were going to create the illusion that the guests on the tram were actually in New York City.

Given this situation, I told our two brilliant art directors, Henry Bumstead and Bill Tuntke, that they would have to use all their tricks to make this paltry budget stretch. They rose to the challenge, rolled up their sleeves and went to work designing a set using full scale buildings in the foreground, forced perspective miniatures in the mid-ground, and "cut out" flats in the background.

The result was pretty spectacular, but despite their best efforts, we just didn't have enough money to cover every square foot with sets. The glaring hole: right opposite the King Kong figure...there was absolutely nothing, just a black wall. If the guests happened to look away from

Kong as he "attacked" the tram, they looked at a blank, black wall and the illusion of being in New York City was broken.

Just before opening, I got nervous, because as both show designer and producer, the buck stopped with me. I asked my boss, Jay Stein, if he thought we could free up some more funds to build a set opposite from King Kong. Jay shook his head no, "If they are looking away from Kong, you have real problems."

On opening day, I took a position near the King Kong figure to watch the guest reaction and sure enough, once Kong started to roar and the tram started to slide back and forth, no one-and I mean no one-looked at that blank wall. Jay had been right, the set across from Kong was not necessary.

I realized then that having a tight budget had probably helped our design, not hindered it. It caused us to design the show to focus guest attention on our strength-King Kong and the New York set behind him-and thus the guests never looked at our weaknesses.

Summary

In theme design we are designing a "show," not a place as in architecture. It doesn't matter whether our "show" takes place in a theme park, a hotel, a restaurant or a store, it's still a "show," not a building or complex of buildings. We generally start the design process by selecting an intellectual property as the basis of our theme, and then develop those stories to build a brand. We try to present the brand in formats (i.e. ride, show, hotel, shop, etc) that capture the brand's essence and appeal to the demographics of the guests we want to attract. We focus our budget on what the guest will primarily perceive and those elements that will present the strongest "show." Architecture can be an important part of this success, provided it is viewed as a part of the overall show, and not an end in itself. If we are successful in integrating all the design disciplines-everything from script writing to engineering to architecture-to "tell the story," our design will create positive emotional responses in the guests and a successful project for the owner.