

LIFE IN THE SUBURB OF A THEME PARK

The Celebration Chronicles by Andrew Ross. Ballantine Books, 1999. 340 pp., \$25.95.

Celebration, U.S.A. by Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins. Henry Holt and Company, 1999. 342 pp., \$25.

Reviewed by Malcolm Quantrill

The final chapter of *Celebration, U.S.A.* gives a good idea of these two inquiries into Disney's latest practical joke on the American public. Under the banner of "Truman Did Not Sleep Here," we learn of a carload of tourists who turn up in the central Florida town of Celebration asking, "Can you tell us where Truman lives?" It was not the home of Harry S. Truman they sought, however, but the house occupied by the hero of the recent movie *The Truman Show*. The disappointed tourists were told that, "(Truman) was just a character. It was all make-believe. And anyway, it wasn't filmed here ... [but] over in Seaside, on the panhandle." Perhaps those hapless tourists cannot be entirely blamed for their confusion of place. Even though the events of *The Truman Show* were fictitious, the fact that they were seeking a real location for Truman's house is simply a reminder of how easily a movie can offer a simulation of reality, and of how enticing such a simulation can be.

In its own way, Celebration — a New Town which sprang from early ideas for EPCOT, that affected sidekick to Disney World — is just such a simulation. Intent upon creating a "model community" and testing the underlying concepts of New Urbanism, the Disney Corporation sought advice from architects and urban planners, including such gurus as Yale's celebrated professor of architecture emeritus Vincent Scully. Eventually, Celebration was built adjacent to the Disney World theme park just outside Orlando.

The authors of *Celebration, U.S.A.*, Douglas Frantz (a *New York Times* reporter), and his wife Catherine Collins (a freelance writer who was formerly with the *Chicago Tribune*), became residents of this Disney World suburb. In the course of their investigations they stuck close to the trail of Monsieur Mouse and his shaping of a "habitat for humanity" in Florida. Their avowed intent is to share with us their evolving experiences of this latest exercise in New Urbanism. They seem to be converts from the outset,

viewing this Disney endeavor as the biggest thing in social engineering since Levittown (at least equal to sliced bread, therefore), and they couldn't wait to become part of it. What exactly is this New Urban phenomenon? The answer given by Vincent Scully is that "Celebration is the most important thing happening in architecture. It marks a return of community."

Communitas, however, implies a sharing; a spirit of "oneness," the collective will and enjoyment of what has been gathered for mutual benefit and enjoyment. How could any of those prerequisites possibly apply to a Walt Disney design for a town that never was? If Celebration represents some kind of New Urbanism, then we clearly need to hurry back to the fundamental sources of urbanism to be found in medieval, Renaissance, and Enlightenment prototypes. For in Celebration, the masters of Hollywood fantasy have only retailed a transparently celluloid dissemblance of a town.

Andrew Ross took a leave from his job as director of the American Studies program at New York University to spend 12 months as a Celebration resident while researching his book. He opens the first chapter of *The Celebration Chronicles* by addressing the profound American desire to seek an alternative hand, one that is different and, one hopes, better than that which we have been dealt: "I live in a country that never runs out of promises. There is always a fresh start, a new frontier, a shiny next step, opportunity or bargain for which enough people will put down some cash, or pick up all their things and go for broke. Even in the rosiest of times, the prospect of satisfaction is not much better than the chances of coming out on top after a casino visit. Running such odds, the long-distance stamina of the American Dream is pretty impressive."

Ross goes on to say that his book has a lot to do with dreams, "because it is about people who regularly used that term when they spoke to me or each other about their recent lives." So in looking at the stamina (continuity) of the American Dream, we are also considering a population whose character is marked by inconstancy, a nagging desire to shift gears, perhaps back to earlier forms of family life and traditions, or to escape from the trap of long employment with a soulless organization in a

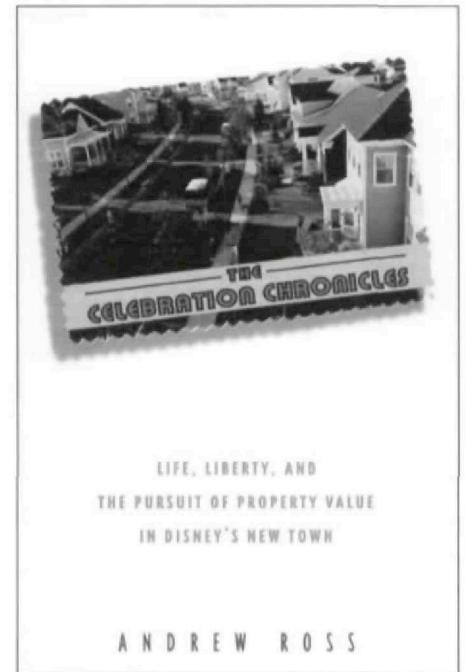
faceless place. In other words, to find a more promising life with fresh vistas on "a new frontier."

Those who bought into Celebration, however, were not just a homogenous colony of frontier-seeking migrants. Once they settled in Celebration, most townsfolk became acquainted with the term New Urbanism, although Ross found them reluctant to grant its local relevance, noting their awareness that "urbanism is associated with big-city life, whose density and anonymity are seen as undesirable for the most part." Celebration's New Urbanism provides for mixed-use (residential and commercial) with mixed housing types and embraces an identifiable center and edge, all in a walkable town built on small lots with interconnecting streets. Ross points out that, "Architects aside, there are few nonprofessionals in town who actively sought out a New Urbanist community to live in."

Views of how people came to live in Celebration and what they found when they got there vary considerably. The wife of a retired doctor referred to Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between the traditional community (*Gemeinschaft*) of full and open relationships and a dispersed modern society of individuals in partial relationships with each other (*Gesellschaft*), adding "[Celebration] is a *Gemeinschaft* and not a *Gesellschaft* place." Ross observes that "such views were common among residents with a healthy romantic streak but who never sought to live in a time capsule."

If a formula to design a *Gemeinschaft* habitation exists, however, on the evidence of Celebration it remains an undiscovered secret. Celebration is no Saltaire, no Pullman. Nevertheless, it has its roots in the company town. Indeed, it is in essence a company town, for while there is a component of residential ownership, the principle of company control is vested in house purchase covenants that restrict individual freedom. The question therefore remains, how can you achieve *Gemeinschaft* in a company town? To do so, you have to imagine trade union leaders sitting down amicably with their industrialist employers. That scenario does not ring true, yet we may readily understand it as a reflection of a movie style romance, an extension of a five dollar matinee thrill for the masses.

Frantz and Collins, for example, report that, "From the outset, the Walt Disney Company had insulated its huge



Florida holdings from most outside governmental interference through the Reedy Creek Improvement District, which provided Disney World with the autonomy and centralized control of a private government.... If parks needed new sewers, the company did not need to seek approval through a voter referendum. When Disney put up a new building, the only construction codes it met were its own."

The authors are quick to point out, however, that the Disney codes and standards were high, and the construction quality was generally good. For verification, they suggest that the careful and controlled development of Disney's property be compared with that of "the tacky commercial strip that connects Orlando to Disney World." The persistent question remains, though, just how people manage to sense any *Gemeinschaft* in Celebration? To which must be added the fact that the label of "company town" just won't go away, and indeed some would rather it did not.

Ross reports what followed when, in the early fall of 1997, Disney began removing its name from billboards advertising Celebration. This happened 17 months after the town became inhabited, and came in response to newspaper articles describing "trouble in paradise." Most conspicuously, Disney took its name off the water tower marking the main entrance to Celebration from Route 192. There were mutterings among the town's merchants, who were distraught at the loss of revenue accompanying the apparent divorce from the high-revenue brand name. At the same time, there was talk among disgruntled homeowners about picketing the sales preview center, with the intention of alerting prospective home buyers to the fact that Disney was not honoring guar-

Celebration, U.S.A.



LIVING IN DISNEY'S
BRAVE NEW TOWN



DOUGLAS FRANTZ and
CATHERINE COLLINS

antees made in its contracts.

These rebellious outbursts prompted the town's community manager, Brent Herrington, to write in the November 1997 issue of his Town Hall newsletter, "Is Disney happy with Celebration? I raised these issues in a recent meeting with management and the answer was an emphatic 'Yes.'... In terms of marketing strategy, the company has been eager for the public to begin recognizing Celebration as a real, thriving community with its own unique identity, separate and distinct from the entertainment-oriented images of Mickey Mouse, the Magic Kingdom, and so on."

Herrington went on to report that Disney's vice-president of business planning and development hoped, in the future, to read about " 'The Town of Celebration' in big letters and 'Disney' in small letters.... Thus, future advertising and marketing materials will include less emphasis on 'Disney' and more on 'Celebration.' The company plans to market Celebration on its own merits, featuring all the special things that give the community its warmth and unique character."

Ross records that not everyone liked Herrington, but that he continued to administer strong doses of boosterism, in parallel with Kathy Johnson, director of the non-profit Celebration Foundation. These two organized numerous public events aimed at "keeping up morale and stoking the flames of volunteerism." They became the town's model Mom and Pop, and were responsible for town meetings held to "to promote stakeholder pride and the sense of ownership." These various efforts were of considerable importance to the home owners, residents, and proto-citizens, because, as Ross notes, "[they] kept the town's sense of itself on track during the turbulent formative years, when support from the company itself appeared to fall off."

As with all matters of home ownership and real estate, it was not only a

question of image. There were practical, everyday problems, too. For example, there were difficulties with the air-conditioning installations. In this case the resident authors, Frantz and Collins, were on the receiving end of Disney's self-granted license to avoid building regulations and inspections. After their second-floor unit had frozen up and they had called two repairmen in two days, the second man told them, "This is our worst nightmare. The lines are buried in the walls and in the concrete floor. I can see us taking the whole house apart." Apparently, the contractor had allowed himself this labor- and cost-saving plumbing technique on the false premise that, since it never froze in Florida, it would never be necessary to access the buried air-conditioning pipes.

Furthermore, in spite of all Disney's "smart," labor-saving construction techniques, the company had enormous difficulty getting the Celebration homes built on time. Frantz and Collins report the case of an ex-Marine captain who had become the golf professional at the Celebration club. He bought a three-story town house located a short walk from both his children's school and the golf course, but with his wife and two children he had for six months occupied a cramped apartment while they waited for the house to be finished. Captain Metcalf became red in the face when he expressed his dissatisfaction. "You can't believe the way we're getting jerked around on our town house," he's quoted as saying. "We have a wall that is bowed out and many other problems.... They put the wrong carpet on the stairs and the wrong cabinets in the kitchen."

Both *The Celebration Chronicles* and *Celebration, U.S.A.* provide a wealth of intriguing detail. What they tell of life in Celebration, however, constructs scenarios as disturbingly bizarre as those of any B-movie. Of the two, I prefer the Ross book for its more detached approach and superior style. But each gives us timely reminders that we are extremely unlikely to discover a new urban utopia in a film director's backyard or based on some poorly researched script. They offer varied paths through an utterly unmagical hinterland, where the terrain is frequently amusing, though not of course for Celebration residents. Indeed, those who are not insulated by mouse-ears must be wondering just what there is to celebrate. ■

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