

Downtown Orlando.

The helicopter-borne radio traffic reporters have a name for the Orlando out by Disney – a realm defined not by geography, demography, or reality but by high-stakes make-believe; one that compresses time and place into a small – and alluring, if entirely ersatz – world of its own. The radio reporters call it “the Attractions,” and to most minds it has replaced Las Vegas as “the definitive sacred grove of popular taste in middle America,” to borrow from Reyner Banham.¹ The symbolic and cultural appeal of Orlando is already a phenomenon of global importance that anthropologists study as they once did Lourdes or Mecca.²

There is another Orlando that few outsiders know, with a downtown and well-kept suburbs such as Winter Park, Maitland, and Longwood that have been around for more than a century. This Orlando has a legacy of modest but appreciable town plans and regional architectural landmarks (including the Maitland Art Center and the Rollins College campus, largely the work of Ralph Adams Cram and James Gamble Rogers II). This is also the Orlando that invariably gets lost in the shuffle between these world-famous Attractions and the acres upon acres of ill-wrought post-Disney subdivisions and endless highways lined with strip shopping centers, discount stores, and side shows.

BETH DUNLOP

Orlando

South of the city limits, where not long ago cattle roamed, the Attractions have been herded together in a placeless place of their own: Disney World, Sea World, Wet'n Wild, and more. Spawned by Walt Disney when he opened his Magic Kingdom in 1971, the Attractions – including two movie-studio theme parks and sound stages (MGM and Universal, both cloned from California originals) – is now a world of Worlds, where a mock Italian opera house shares a mammoth parking lot with a mock medieval village, and where strip centers are disguised as Wild West stockades, Iowa “Main Streets,” and Spanish colonial settlements.

The Magic Kingdom has inspired the admiration and envy of urban designers who yearn for the kind of order and control it offers. But the Attractions are jumbled together in a planner's nightmare – disorienting and chaotic, tasteless and bland, overstated and fake, yet at the same time exhilarating – a vast and amorphous sprawl that floats free of context or orientation. Besides the expected Worlds, as in Disney and Sea, there are Kart World, Shell World, Bargain World, even a hotel called Wilson World. Expressways veer through, and other roads start and stop for no real reason. International Drive, for example, culminates (or begins) in a vast complex of factory outlet shops called Belz Outlet World. At the other end is Sea World, although the road actually bypasses the vast marine theme park and goes on to link up with Interstate 4. That expressway parallels International Drive for much of its length, causing many of the tourist-luring buildings to put on identical faces, front and back.

“Caverns in Virginia may have neon lights, and California may have its dolphin shows, but Florida makes Worlds

out of everything," wrote John Rothchild in his informal history of the state, *Up for Grabs*.³ In Florida there has always been an impulse to rearrange reality, to regard the land as a stage set – an impulse perfected in the Attractions. In that peculiar combination of the very drab and the highly ostentatious, there is little outside of Disney World (or perhaps one should say Robert A. M. Stern World, Arata Isozaki World, Michael Graves World, Gwathmey Siegel World, Arquitectonica World, and Venturi, Scott Brown World) that can be considered capital-A Architecture – although the design for Universal Studios' guitar-shaped Hard Rock Cafe (by Aura Architects of Maitland, Florida) won an honor award from the Florida chapter of the American Institute of Architects the

torn down to build more hotel convention facilities). With both Disney and Universal in Orlando, more and more movies are being filmed there. Nickelodeon Studios – certainly a leading purveyor of ideas and images to young television viewers – is based there as well, on the Universal Studios grounds.

The Orlando that Walt Disney found when he started buying up huge tracts of Orange and Osceola counties in the early 1960s was not precisely a time capsule. The arrival of the military during World War II (and the air force and naval facilities that followed) had spelled a certain end of innocence to what had been a sleepy town graced by a Kress-and-Woolworth's Main Street, spring-fed lakes, oak trees laden with Spanish moss,

castles and French châteaux – SunBank Center has little spires at its roofline; DuPont Center is a connected sequence of elongated, mansard-roofed blocks.

Yet Orlando by most standards of reckoning has a successful downtown, decently scaled, with an intact main street and a bustle of people day, night, and weekend. Its renaissance has a storybook quality of its own. Shortly after the arrival of Disney World, an entrepreneur named Bob Snow eyed a block of old buildings by the railroad tracks, including a vaguely Richardsonian train station and some freight houses, and imagined a ribald Victorian entertainment complex that would draw tourists away from the more wholesome theme parks. In 1974, Snow opened Rosie O'Grady's, full of

near ghost town of the 1970s was aided by a carefully nurtured plan that safeguarded shopping and encouraged restaurants, keeping a reasonable scale along Orange Avenue. A considerable collection of historic buildings was saved, including the old Woolworth and Kress. Along Pine Street, a fine row of two-story 19th-century brick structures has become a lawyers' row.

One building that did not make it was the 1958 city hall, described as a "pink and brownish-looking building" when it was dedicated.⁵ It was replaced in 1991 by a new city hall more in the fairy-tale spirit of Orlando – a stubbily proportioned copper-domed structure with grandiose architectural aspirations that looks as if someone had lopped off the top of a

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same year that Isozaki's "Team Disney" building (realized in collaboration with the Orlando firm of Hunton Brady Pryor Maso) won both state and national AIA honor awards.

Orlando is one of America's most visited cities. Last year, more than 13.5 million pilgrims checked into its 81,000 hotel rooms, which are fitted into buildings of every conceivable persuasion, from inconspicuous, low-slung motels to Marriott's Orlando World Center and the Stouffer Orlando resort, both of which feature atrium lobbies that are among the largest anywhere, and a Hyatt Regency (Grand Cypress) with a half-acre swimming pool. Orlando now markets itself as a tourist destination in the manner of its desert twin, and in most respects Orlando could be considered a kind of family-values Vegas, with just the merest of titillations but plenty of the glitz. Not to be outdone, Las Vegas is now recasting itself as an alternative Orlando, with amusement-park offerings and hotels themed on classic childhood stories such as *The Wizard of Oz* – the very combination of story line and rides that has served Disney so well over the years.⁴ The two cities' strategies now overlap, to the degree that the professional organization called Lighting Dimensions International, which specializes in both architectural and theatrical lighting, has scheduled next year's convention in Reno to include a study trip titled "Las Vegas: Learning From Orlando."

More, perhaps, than Las Vegas ever will, Orlando exports its products – not just stuffed Mickey Mouses and floppy-eared Goofy hats, but ideas, of sorts. The mammoth publishing company Harcourt Brace is based there (and at one point had a wonderful child's-garden-of-the-mind attraction of its own; but that was



Tibetan monks protesting the inclusion of a replica of the Potala Palace as part of Splendid China, 1993.

and neighborhoods stocked with Craftsman bungalows, neo-Tudor cottages, and Mediterranean villa-ettes. Orange Blossom Drive, a major north-south thoroughfare, was a sin strip for several decades; even into the 1980s it was honky-tonk enough to provoke civic despair. Now the strip is simply gritty, an ode to macho sensibilities, with topless joints interspersed among the tire and transmission dealers.

One might expect Orlando's downtown to have suffered with the explosive growth to the south; even the Orange County Convention Center was located on International Drive, in acquiescence not just to the location of hotel rooms. There were in fact low moments in the 1970s, when all the attention was focused on Disney's Main Street while the real one, Orange Avenue, lay desolate after business hours. Today, downtown Orlando has reinvented itself as a corporate and commercial success story, with its own NBA team – the Magic – housed in a sleek, contemporary Art Deco arena that forms the centerpiece of the civic center. From a distance, its corporate towers trade on the imagery of German

imported Victoriana and tourists, who, happy to sit along, sat on benches from an L&N Railroad station or on chairs from an English monastery, under the dim light of a chandelier salvaged from the 1904 First National Bank of Boston. Soon the complex, called Church Street Station, began to grow, the authentic and the ersatz unabashedly intertwined and metaphors happily mixed, Western saloon next to French *pâtisserie* across from English pub, bawdiness the only common theme. One restaurant boasts a table that Al Capone ate at; a set of guns owned by Jesse James is on display at the Cheyenne Saloon and Opera House.

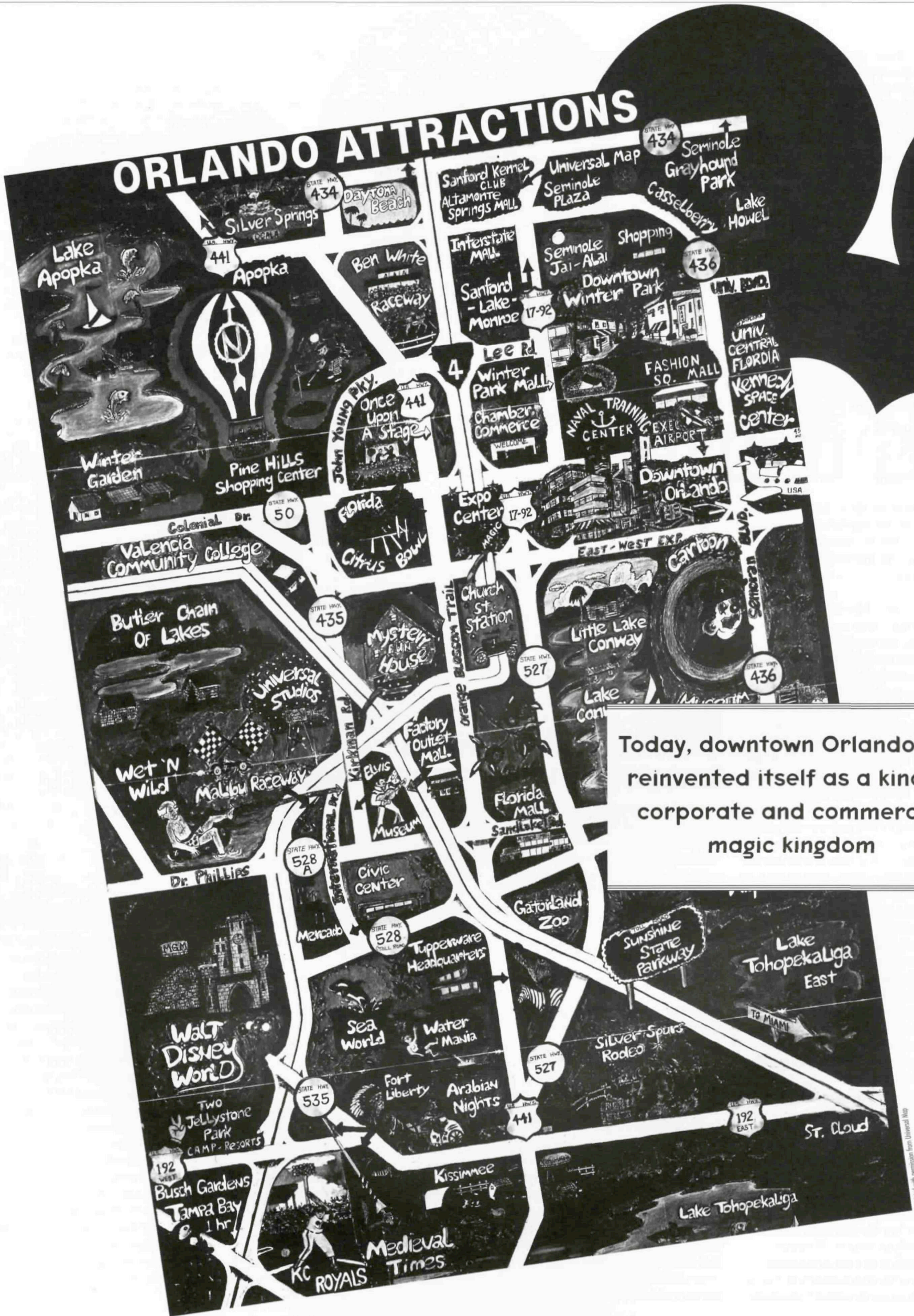
If Church Street Station was full of borrowed times, places, and paraphernalia, at least it was not a copy of anything else. But where people shop, franchises follow, and by the late eighties Church Street Station had expanded to include a retail complex with plenty of familiar names. Not quite a festival marketplace or a suburban shopping center, it is red brick with simplified Victorian detailing, a suburban incursion into the center city. Downtown Orlando's salvation from the

much taller building and planted it on the ground. It has a three-story lobby, an art gallery, and even a gift shop that sells a \$25 souvenir plate of the new building and a poster of the old one being imploded.

In many ways this is not the real town hall anyway, since the Magic Kingdom has its own (in fact the whole Disney empire – presuming an empire to be

bigger than a kingdom – is run from Isozaki's imposing, up-to-the-minute "Team Disney" building). But Orlando's city hall is no more ostentatious than the various restaurants and hotels on International Drive or State Route 192, which runs from Disney World to the former cow town of Kissimmee (home of the Florida Turnpike interchange for the Attractions). Route 192 boasts a full-fledged medieval village, a frontier trading post, a Capone's nightclub that offers dinner and a show and "handsome mobsters and beautiful dames," and a new "Old Town," tucked neatly into a strip shopping center next to a Days Inn, not to mention the Tupperware Hall of Fame. In December, these points of interest were joined by a new attraction called Splendid China, which carries the re-presentation of history a step further: its \$100 million, 76-acre campus includes miniaturized versions of not only the Great Wall of China but also the Potala Palace of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, Tibet, a picturesque if unseemly trophy of geopolitical aggression that no one thought to question until the deed was done.

There is more here than just Mickey Mouse. Orlando offers a weird meshing of popular fantasy and mundane taste.



Today, downtown Orlando has reinvented itself as a kind of corporate and commercial magic kingdom

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The appeal of Disney World is that its subject is the past and the future, not the present, and other

places, not home. The past has always been a more successful byroad than the future – for Disney, for Orlando, and for America. Down on Route 192, for example, there is a \$4.95 attraction called Xanadu, a strangely amorphous, sprayed-concrete “house of the future.” As a tourist attraction it has a greater impact because of its smell, which is dank, than for its imagery, which is no more ahead of its time than a Jetsons cartoon. It stays empty most of the time, but because it looks like one of those dinosaur gas stations from the forties, it has a slightly wistful aspect, beckoning those few tourists who might turn off here rather than into Wolfman Jack’s or Elvis Presley’s or Al Capone’s offerings, not to mention Shell World, Bargain World, or Kart World.

When “serious” attempts are made to find the future outside the Attractions, they too invoke the past, either distant or recent. After five years of debate and bureaucratic skirmishing occasioned by Florida’s statewide growth management policy, Avalon Park – a 9,400-acre new town planned by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk for the Flag

traditional “villages” and neighborhoods on either side are intended to integrate the home and the workplace, schools and shopping, in most cases within walking distance of each other.

Disney is about to embark on the development of an “ideal” town of its own, Celebration, laid out on 5,000 acres for an eventual population of 20,000 by Robert A. M. Stern in association with Alexander Cooper and Jacquelin Robertson. As with much of Eisner-era Disney, it is an architecturally ambitious undertaking, a sort of Columbus, Indiana, South, with key buildings designed by Philip Johnson, Michael Graves, Robert Venturi, Cesar Pelli, Charles Moore, and Graham Gund, among others. Among the first to be built will be the Disney Institute – a Chautauqua-type conference and vacation study center designed by Aldo Rossi and Morris Adjmi as yet another locus for Orlando’s expanding commerce in ideas. Celebration is intended to make good, if different, Walt Disney’s unrealized dream of a utopian, residential Epcot (“Experimental Community of Tomorrow”), which devolved into the Epcot we know today of large commercial pavilions and the whirl around the world – a one-mile circuit with stops in Mexico, Norway, China, Italy, Morocco, Germany, Japan, France, England, and Canada, before landing back in the U.S.A.

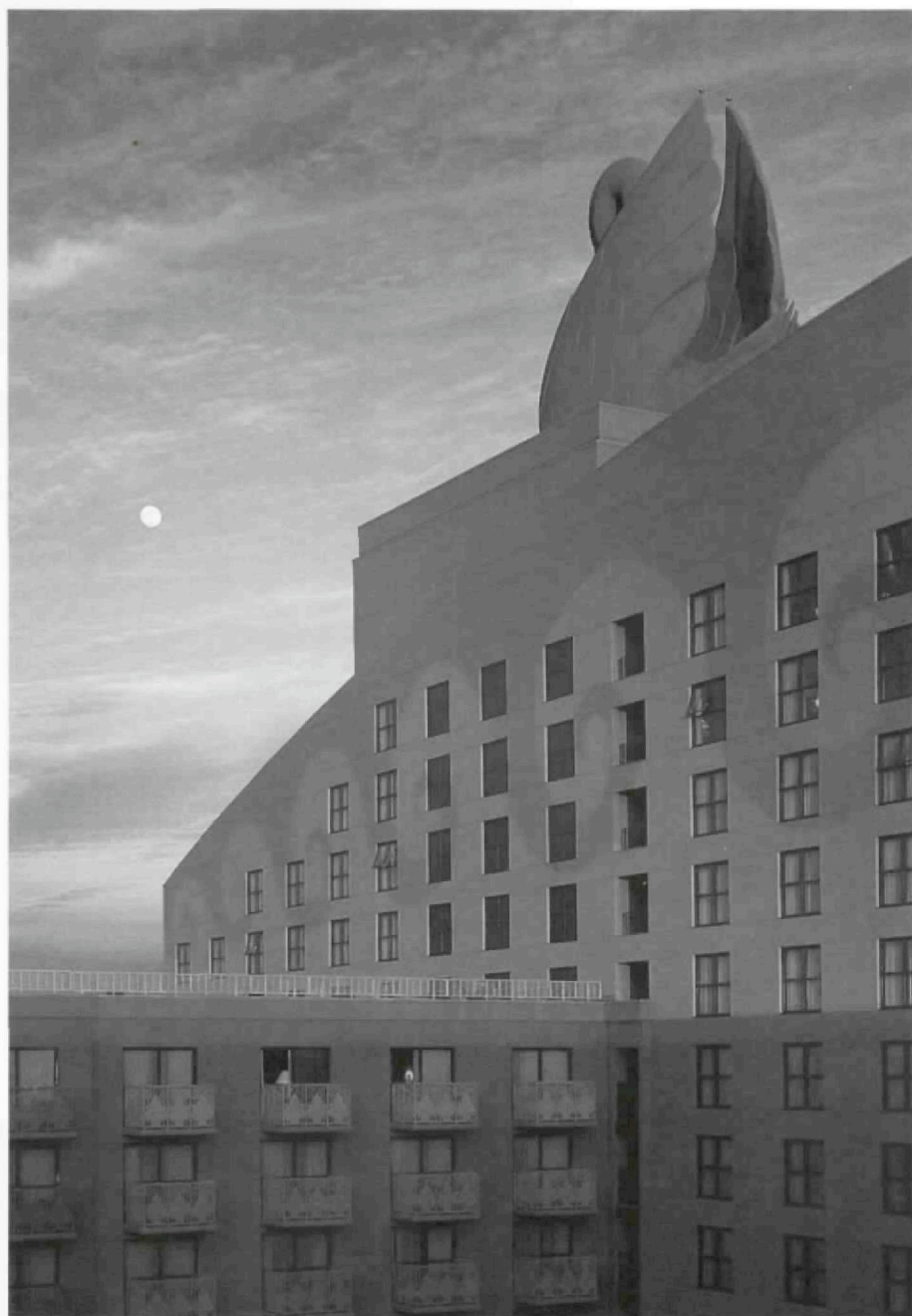
Orlando’s micro-cosmic impulse, begun 20 years ago with Disney’s small world, now exerts an authentic global influence of its own. In 1939, the WPA guide to Florida reported that Orlando had, in less than half a century, “grown from a trading post on a cow range to a city resembling a great park.” Today it still seems less like a city than like the world’s first international park – an improbable, extravagantly scaled meshing of popular fantasy and the economic magic of mass leisure. ■



“Places of Learning” Park.

Development Company – is actually about to break ground.⁶ Sited 15 miles east of downtown Orlando and 25 miles north and east of Disney World and the Attractions, it is planned to accommodate a population of 70,000. A greenbelt spine runs through it following the banks of the Econlockhatchee River, while neo-

HWH Architects, Harcourt Brace’s “Places of Learning” Park, 1984–85, demolished. ▶



Michael Graves, architect, Swan Hotel, Lake Buena Vista, 1987–90.

1 Reyner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserta* (Layton, Utah: Peregrine Smith, 1982), p. 42.

2 Alexander Moore, “Walt Disney World: Bounded Ritual Space and the Playful Pilgrimage Center,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 53 (October 1980), pp. 207–18.

3 John Rothchild, *Up for Grabs* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), p. 49.

4 Calvin Sims, “Family Values as a Las Vegas Smash,” *New York Times*, 3 February 1994, p. C1.

5 From the *Orlando Sentinel*; quoted on a wall plaque in the new city hall.

6 Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, *Towns and Town-making Principles* (Cambridge: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 1991), pp. 88–94; Allan Wallis, “Florida’s Urban Villages: Salvation or Sprawl?” *Planning*, December 1991, pp. 16–17.

