



Revisiting The Architecture of Reassurance

By Michael McCall

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If entertainment designers were knighted, we would address Mr. Hensch, Disney's Imagineering philosopher, as Sir John. More than fifteen years ago I had the privilege of receiving a personal tutorial from Sir John on the Architecture of Reassurance. As a young Rouse real estate developer in the presence of a member of Walt's senior creative cabinet, which three decades earlier had given birth to theme park industry, I listened with rapt attention.

There is little doubt that Sir John has long forgotten our conversation; but, there is also little doubt that he has not forgotten the silent, omnipresent, innate psychology that shapes the human emotional response to environments. Just as governments and religions have leveraged this psychology for thousands of years for the purpose of the Architecture of Authority, Disney's commercial motivations led to the deployment of the Architecture of Reassurance; to designing and developing environments that inherently communicate that we are safe and well cared for today, and we will be even better off tomorrow. Walt even christened Disneyland, in 1955, as the, "*Happiest Place on Earth.*"

With all the threats that confront us, it is has become increasingly difficult to cognitively believe that the world is safe, that life is good, and that we should be happy and content. It is hard to deny that the world is a scary place. Life is, as it has always been, a challenge. However, just as we can become ebullient at the happy ending to a good story told via reflected light in a dark, suburban box called a multiplex, so too can the Architecture of Reassurance, the design and development of places, the spinning of integral, implicit environmental yarns, help people to feel good.

Emotions are driven by stories, including the guest's experience of place, from the environmental narrative that connects the scenes, binding myriad perceptions into a whole of potent meaning. The narrative of place, the effective telling of a three dimensional tale, is communication through the multi-sensory medium of immersion, the cohesion of elements into a singleness of purpose which instills the suspension of disbelief and transports consciousness to another time and place.

In the realm of leisure activities, positive changes in attitude and behavior (like greater attendance, longer length of stay, higher per capita expenditures), all start with clear, compelling and rewarding emotional experiences. Beyond this philosophy within the berm, the Architecture of Reassurance can also be good business in the real world. Neo-traditional town planning, the Seaside-types of developments often associated with urban designer Andreas Duany – where Mayberry meets feng shui – have been successful in cutting new communities from emotionally comforting cloth.

The challenge and the opportunity for the retail, real

estate, and entertainment industries is to better serve the public's yearnings, the country's emotional needs, by leveraging the Architecture of Reassurance in commercial development. Imagine if we could transform everyday places into realms that envelope and evoke our emotions in a soothing, subliminal conversation, reassuring us that life in America has been, is, and will be, good.

Ironically, while we need this reassurance more than ever, the mainstay of American commercial crossroads, the Mall, is trending downward. Today, Mall visitation patterns are filled with alarming symptoms of a structural, chronic illness. Americans are taking fewer and shorter Mall trips, and shopping fewer stores per trip. Retail, as we know it, has fallen on hard times that are only partially the result of the country's poor economic climate.

What flourished in previous decades is not likely to thrive in the future, and new paradigms of commercial places need to be conceived that are founded in what consumers want and not by the industry's tired traditions. As long as Malls are simply large aggregations of disparate tenants, each aggressively telling its own product story in a benign design envelope; as long as the Mall developer's paramount mission is to create full-scale portfolios of investment grade leases (as opposed to first responding to consumer's yearnings), Malls will simply remain loud cacophonies of commercialism, huge distribution centers devoid of any emotional value in our lives.

How can we apply ourselves to reversing this trend? How can we reinvent the American Mall and make it the equivalent of a day spa for emotions? Surely the public would handsomely reward such a place with loyal and profitable patronage.

While the Architecture of Reassurance is the key strategic concept, pure architecture – the design of the facility and façade – is an impotent, one hand clapping, approach. The whole idea of the Architecture of Reassurance is, indeed, the presentation of a whole; of an internally consistent reality which is not only immersive physically, but is immersive conceptually as well. Herein lies the rub, the conundrum of real estate: Tenants.

Perhaps this is a good time to reinvent the very process of retail, to mix up the rules in order to achieve a different, better, and profit sustaining result. Perhaps it is time for major retailers and wholesalers to become creative and financial partners with developers, and for these new joint ventures to embrace the Architecture of Reassurance from inside the store out, thereby crafting and presenting a singular sensation, the reassuring embrace of the whole story.