

by Brian Torobin

*"I hold a view that may be somewhat shocking to an audience as sophisticated as this, and that is, that the greatest piece of design in the United States today is Disneyland. If you think about Disneyland and think of its performance in relationship to its purpose — its meaning to people more than its meaning to the process of development — you will find it the outstanding piece of urban design in the United States. It took an area of activity — the amusement park — and lifted it to a standard so high in its performance, in its respect for people, in its functioning for people, that it really became a brand new thing. It fulfills the functions that it set out to accomplish unself-consciously, usefully and profitably. I find more to learn in the standards that have been set and the goals that have been achieved in the development of Disneyland than in any other single piece of physical development in the country."*

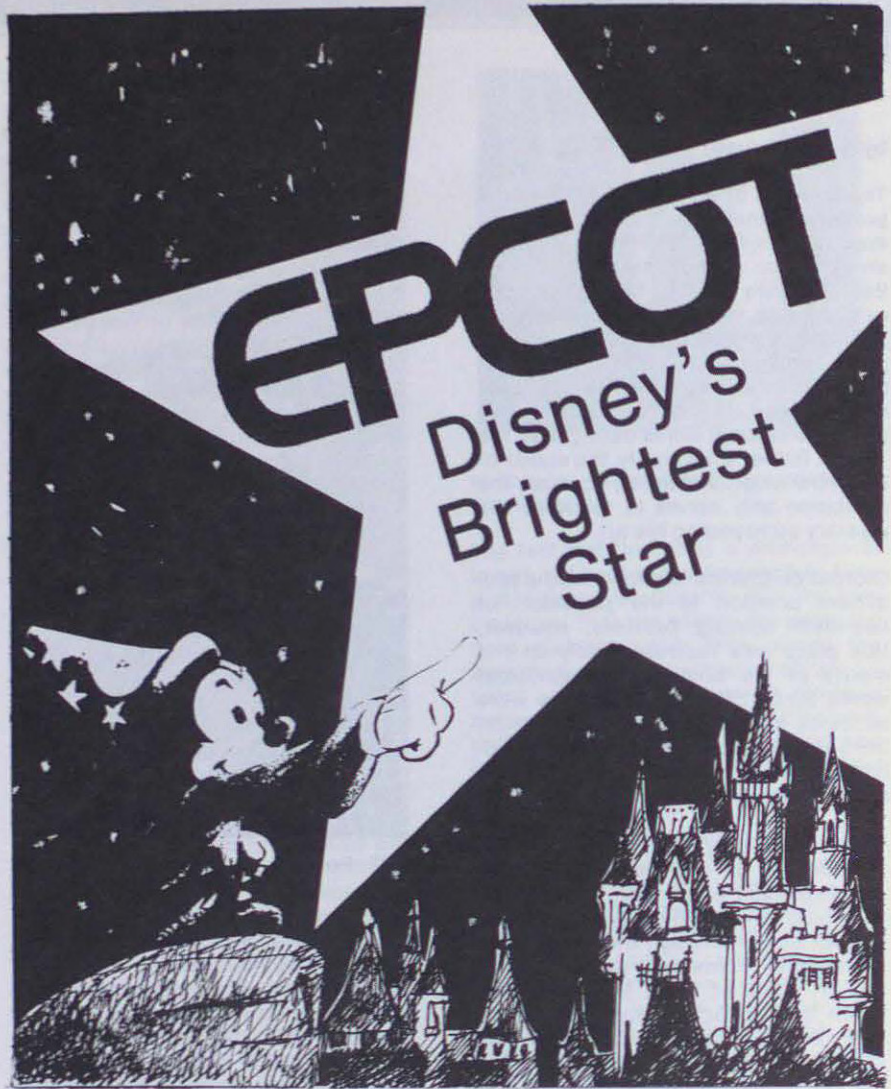
James Rouse,  
Commencement Speech at  
the Harvard School of Design  
in 1963<sup>1</sup>

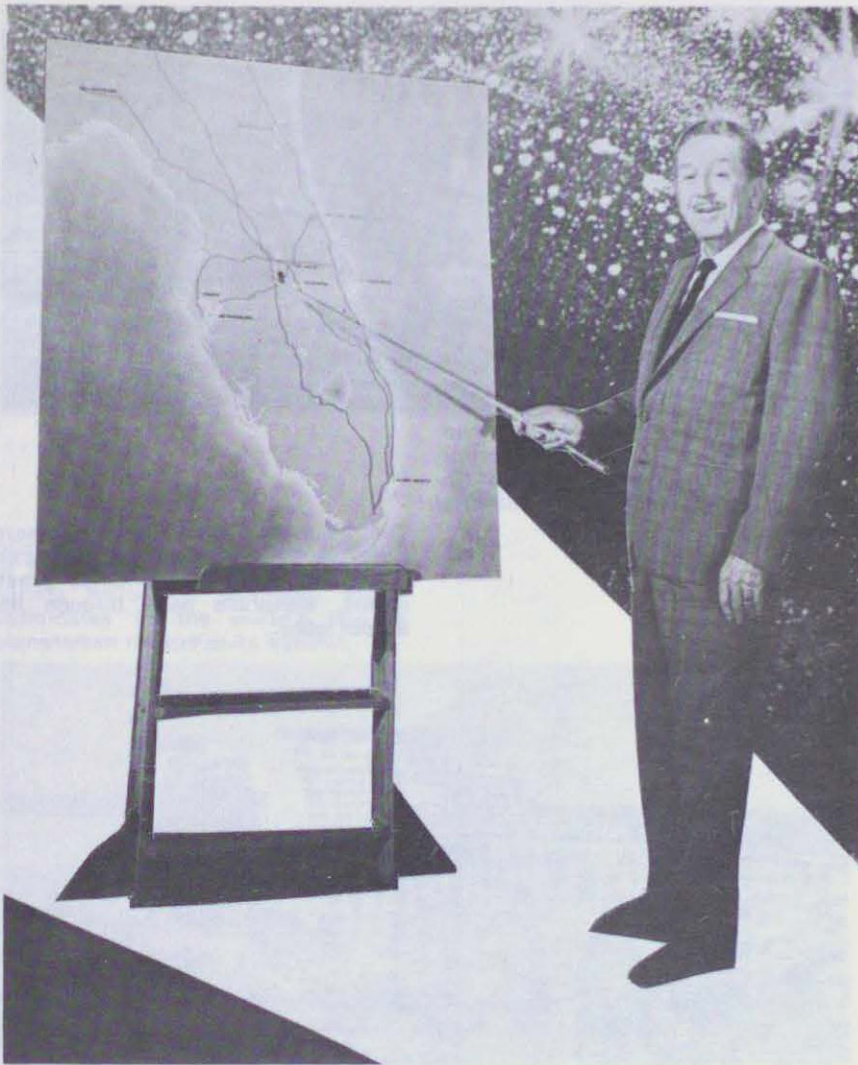
The man that brought Mickey Mouse, Fantasia and Disneyland to the world was always obsessed with challenges. His creative abilities in solving the problems inherent in such challenges was the key to his success. Walt Disney showed himself to be a true genius of design in whatever he undertook, whether it be the first colour-and-sound animated film or the construction of a truly innovative entertainment park. Disneyland was the first product of WED (Walter Elias Disney) Enterprises, the architectural and engineering branch of Walt Disney Productions that was established in 1952 to design the famous park. Its team of architects, animators, show designers and artists came to be known as 'Imagineers', a term effectively expressing the synergetic mixture of imagination and engineering forming the basis of WED's design processes. The success of Disneyland encouraged the Imagineers to stretch their creative abilities and invent new technologies for innovative

methods of entertainment, communication and theatre design. This was especially evident in the four highly-acclaimed pavilions that Disney eventually produced for the New York World's Fair in 1964. Perhaps more importantly, the Fair allowed Disney to bring a bit of Disneyland to the eastern region, a market as yet untouched by the Anaheim 'Magic Kingdom'. Though adamant that there should be only one Disneyland, Walt was convinced that he could build another unique imagined environment in the Atlantic region. This one, however, would be focused on a more serious creative challenge spurred on by the universal themes dealt with at the New York exposition.

The new enterprise would be the result of his persistent search for solutions to the problems of present-day cities. Disney wanted to plan and build a unique 'City of Tomorrow' that would restore a measure of comfort, cleanliness and humanity that existed

before the advent of today's smog and concrete communities. He reasoned that if his creative people could solve the technical and planning problems of smaller-scale projects such as his own Burbank film studio and Disneyland, then they could also apply their creativity to the design of a totally innovative community. To begin with, Disney realized he needed another form of Disneyland to attract attention and bring people and funds to his dream project. Just three years after the California park opened, Walt initiated research to select the best possible site for a new and different theme park and adjoining 'City of Tomorrow'. Several sites had been considered, including the riverfront of St. Louis and the Canadian side of Niagara Falls. However, by 1963, Disney executives agreed on a region that had all the qualities needed for the establishment and growth of a recreational, industrial and residential complex as envisioned by their boss. The choice of central Florida was ideal





because of its climate and the size of land available.<sup>2</sup> Disney was unhappy, to say the least, about the profusion of uncontrolled commercial development which began to encircle Disneyland. With the Florida project he wanted the blessing of size so that he could buffer his recreation park and 'community of the future' from such possible growth; in addition to giving him enough land to experiment with the various ideas he had. By the end of 1965, the company had acquired 27,433 acres of land southwest of Orlando, an area equal in size to the City of San Francisco or twice the size of the island of Manhattan<sup>3</sup>. Work soon began on the design of the theme park, but Walt left most of his planning to those Imagineers who had previous experience with Disneyland. Disney himself was more obsessed with his idea of a City of Tomorrow.

He continually tried to explain his intentions to both a confused press and an enthusiastic staff as to what he had in

mind. Eventually Walt developed a name for the city that succinctly summed up the project's purpose. It would be called the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow — EPCOT. In his first public reference to EPCOT, Disney said:

I would like to be a part of building a model community, a City of Tomorrow, you might say, because I don't believe in going out to this extreme blue-sky stuff that some architects do. I believe that people still want to live like human beings. There's a lot of things that could be done. I'm not against the automobile, but I just feel the automobile has moved into communities too much. I feel that you can design so that the automobile is there, but still put people back as pedestrians again, you see. I'd love to work on a project like that. Also, I mean, in the way of schools, facilities for the community, com-

munity entertainments and life. I'd love to be part of building up a school of tomorrow.... This might become a pilot operation for the teaching age."<sup>4</sup>

The scope for his dream was so wide-ranging that even his staff was not quite sure how it could manifest itself in concrete form. With the help of company officials and designers, in addition to outside commissioned work, Walt began accumulating the necessary facts and information needed for EPCOT. He ordered reports made on the history of model planned cities with special attention paid to their relative successes and failures. He initiated contacts with industry to find out what was happening in the country's research laboratories. Visits were arranged to hundreds of factories, foundations and research institutes. Disney also realized the negative effects that outdated building codes, protective labour unions, standard contracting procedures and short-sighted politicians could have on a constantly changing, progressive city of the future. As a result, he and other officials drew up a proposal for governing the entire project; a plan that would have to be approved by the Florida legislature. Florida laws allowed the formation of certain special districts in the state with the power to control and organize certain government services such as fire protection and water. Disney requested responsibility over several wide-ranging services to fulfill the needs of the project's future users and citizens as well as to allow for innovation in the entire EPCOT experiment. These responsibilities included such government functions as drainage, zoning, power, inspection, gas, water, roads and others. Walt also wanted to have the legal power to establish a municipality within his property which would be governed by a set of laws that took into account civil rights and other city regulations<sup>5</sup>.

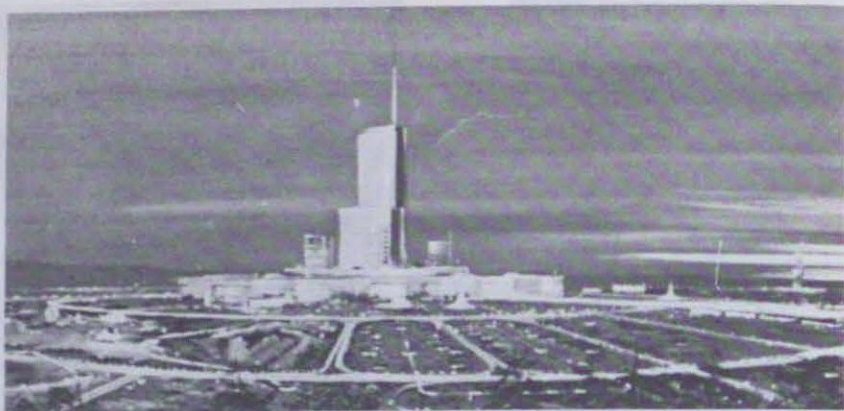
Unfortunately, Disney never got to see the realization of his project beyond its very early site preparations on the forty-three square mile lot. Walt died after a struggle with lung cancer in December of 1966. Soon after, his brother and financial right hand man Roy officially declared that the Florida project encompassing EPCOT, the new theme park and all other facilities would be called Walt Disney World in tribute to the man behind the dream<sup>6</sup>. Just a few months after Disney's death, Florida passed the 'improvement district' proposal sent up by the company with the inclusion of some minor modifications. The designers and officials of the firm were now left with the colossal task of bringing Walt's project to reality. After they acquired the power to establish an independent governing district free of county interference, it went full speed ahead with a planned first-phase open-

ing set for October first, 1971. During the first years of Walt Disney World, the EPCOT city was put temporarily on hold. What visitors to the complex have seen since 1971 is the result of attempts to combine several of Disney's concepts for EPCOT with Walt's wish for the construction of a new entertainment and recreation centre. The major component of this first phase is a twenty-five hundred acre 'Vacation Kingdom'. Located in the northern corner of the massive property, this multi-faceted resort includes a theme park similar to California's Disneyland, three themed resort hotels, two championship golf courses, six hundred fifty acres of lake for boating and swimming, a six hundred acre campground, a twelve thousand lot parking area and a 'Transportation and Ticket Center' where guests board Disney's famous monorail system to reach the many spots in the complex. The Vacation Kingdom is complemented by Lake Buena Vista, one of two municipalities permitted by Florida to be built and operated by Disney. Lake Buena Vista now boasts four hotels, an office plaza, a lakeside shopping and dining complex, a conference center plus scores of rental accommodations in the form of villas arranged along the Buena Vista Lagoon and golf course.

Walt Disney World has been able to answer many of EPCOT's original goals as stated in one of Disney's last descriptions of the project:

EPCOT will take its cue from the new ideas and new technologies now emerging from the creative centers of American industry. It will always be introducing and testing and demonstrating new materials and systems.... When EPCOT has become a reality, it's our hope that it will stimulate American industry to develop new solutions that will meet the needs of people expressed right here in in this experimental community<sup>7</sup>.

As part of the overall EPCOT experiment, the first phase has exhibited some of the most unique and innovative systems and technologies. Examples of these are a total fibre-optic telecommunications system, a pneumatic AVAC trash disposal system, linear-induction-propelled PeopleMovers and non-polluting, all-electric monorails, energy-efficient guest houses and modular, pre-fabricated building construction. Soon a new pyrolytic solid waste energy conversion plant will open to help air-condition buildings and cook food using energy derived from the project's garbage. Another program which is truly vital to the existence of Walt Disney World is its water control plan. Since much of the land bought by Disney suffered from the persistent Florida problem of flooding, a water control plan was included in the site



Early conceptual design for EPCOT consisting of a central business district surrounded by concentric rings of industrial, commercial and residential zones.

The 1,046 room Contemporary Resort Hotel in the Vacation Kingdom was assembled using pre-fabricated guest rooms. Monorails pass through its atrium lobby.



development that will eventually create a system of twenty-two automatic float gates and fifty-five miles of canals. This will maintain the height and flow of water even under the most severe rainfall conditions. A major part of this drainage system is the two hundred acre, man-made 'Seven Seas Lagoon' at the center of the Vacation Kingdom<sup>8</sup>.

By 1975, the success of the first phase had already been established and plans were underway to build the second. WED designers had been tackling the awesome task of trying to bring Walt's City of Tomorrow to fruition since his death. The world had seen many changes since 1966 and, as a result, the Imagineers began to search for a more timely and accurate translation of the EPCOT dream. Disney officials came to the realization that they could not practically construct a futuristic, experimental city and insure that it would not become obsolete within years of its opening. Technological and social

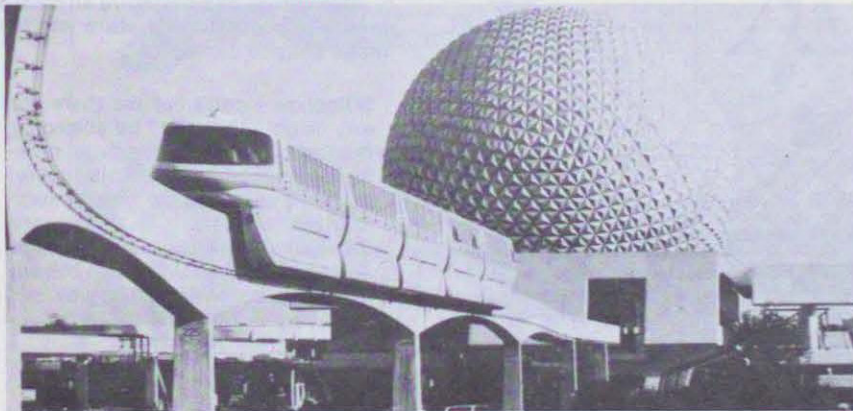
change happen too fast on this planet. They also realized that they could not very well experiment with the lives of the twenty thousand proposed residents of EPCOT. Imagine enjoying the advantages of a brand new EPCOT kitchen only to have it removed from under your eyes and replaced every few years. WED Imagineers were satisfied that millions of temporary residents (i.e. visitors) to the Florida Project could allow for enough practical experimentation to occur without tampering with people's lives. Thus came the decision to drop the 'city' proposal and turn to a more realistic and effective approach.

Disney's people had always excelled in the fields of communication and entertainment. It was thus reasoned that EPCOT's new format should take advantage of this expertise by becoming a Disney Imagineered center where creative minds from universities, industry, government, science and the arts, from all areas of the world, could



The first phase of EPCOT Center with Future World in the foreground and World Showcase beyond.

**Spaceship Earth** — Enclosing a space of 2.2 million cubic feet, this complete sphere houses a ride/show which culminates in the world's largest planetarium theatre at its summit.



develop, test, demonstrate and communicate prototype concepts and new technologies. EPCOT would become a kind of World's Fair that would constantly work toward achieving better ways of life for mankind. Realizing that mankind's problems were not limited to his cities but rather were worldwide, the designers searched for a more global philosophical framework to achieve EPCOT's goals. This was found in the writings of R. Buckminster Fuller and his thoughts on our 'Spaceship Earth':

One of the interesting things to me about our spaceship is that it is a mechanical vehicle, just as is an automobile.... You know that you're going to have to keep the machine in good order or it's going to be in trouble and fail to function. We have not been seeing our Spaceship Earth as an integrally-designed machine which is to be persistently successful must be comprehended and serviced in

total.... Now there is one outstandingly important fact regarding Spaceship Earth, and that is that no instruction book came with it... we were forced, because of the lack of an instruction book, to use our intellect, which is our supreme faculty, to devise scientific experimental procedures and to interpret effectively the significance of the experimental finding. Thus because the instruction manual was missing we are learning how we safely can anticipate the consequences of an increasing number of alternative ways of extending our satisfactory survival and growth — both physical and metaphysical<sup>9</sup>.

The result of the combination of the search for an effective set of operating instructions and Disney's lifetime dream of helping to solve technological and sociological problems is a massive six hundred acre communication and

entertainment showplace that just recently made its debut on October 1st of 1982.

Officially called EPCOT Center, the complex is located at the heart of Walt Disney World and is linked by monorail to the Vacation Kingdom. Here Disney has created a park filled with thematic and international pavilions dedicated to communicating solutions to Spaceship Earth's problems as well as to displaying the beauty in the diversity of her inhabitants. The first segment of EPCOT Center is Future World — an area focusing on the history and future challenges of the critical problems facing our planet today. Guests entering EPCOT Center walk directly underneath 'Spaceship Earth', the world's first, large-scale complete geodesic sphere housing a major introductory theme show. The storyline of the spiralling ride within is based on Fuller's belief that mankind's survival vitally depends on his ability to have access to accurate and relevant information and on his ability to record, retrieve and communicate this vital information. Beyond the eighteen storey globe lies EPCOT's communications corridor or CommuniCore. Here, visitors can directly experience and learn about new technologies and products in a series of displays housed in two semi-circular buildings. One planned show for CommuniCore will be the educational 'Solutions' exhibit which will communicate ideas and concepts being instituted in cities all over the world for combatting various urban problems. Radiating outward from CommuniCore is an array of privately-sponsored pavilions dealing with such topics as energy, transportation, imagination and 'The Land'. Each pavilion exhibits the ultimate in imaginative communication and entertainment systems and each display or show is the result of intensive collaboration with institutes or individuals involved in the various themes and subjects. These exhibits boast many firsts in show design including the largest animated film ever produced and the first large-screen, three-dimensional movie combining computer generated animation, live-action and special effects. Additional pavilions planned for the future include 'Horizons', 'The Seas', 'Space' and 'Life and Health'. The latter promises to be truly educational as it will offer a ride through the human body as well as an innovative theatre allowing guests to experience vision through the eyes of the visually handicapped.

To the south of Future World lies EPCOT Center's World Showcase. This is a unique, permanent international exposition displaying the accomplishments, culture, traditions, history and folklore of a variety of nations. Unlike those at most World's Fairs, these pavilions take the form of authentic recreations of



Canada — A portion of Ottawa's Chateau Laurier Hotel stands beside a recreation of a Laurentian mountainside within which the new 360° film *O Canada* is shown.

People's Republic of China — The panoramic movie *The Wonders of China* is shown in a traditional structure set among pines, bamboos, willows and lotus ponds.



several architectural styles indigenous to the country, each forming its own village-like environment. To give equal facade exposure to each nation, the pavilions are situated side-by-side around a forty acre lagoon. Shops, shows, rides and restaurants are also sponsored by private concerns from the participating countries (except for the People's Republic of China) and each pavilion is operated by foreign students participating in year-long World Showcase programs. The nine countries opening exhibits this fall are Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, the United States, Italy, West Germany, the People's Republic of China and Mexico. The site design allows for constant expansion of World Showcase and pavilions for the State of Israel, Equatorial Africa, Morocco, Spain, Denmark, Costa Rica and Venezuela should soon appear at EPCOT Center. This international portion also presents innovative theatres and shows. Both Canada and China have CircleVision

360° cinemas offering guests 'wrap-around' film experiences of their countries. The United States pavilion, called the 'American Adventure', presents the most advanced Audio-Animatronics ever exhibited. This is a process invented by WED Imagineers using computers, electronics and pneumatics to animate any form of three-dimensional figure. The American Adventure show startles guests when Ben Franklin actually climbs a flight of stairs during his role in a soul-searching treatment of American history.

Some observers may say that what has been built in Walt Disney World is just another form of amusement park having no link to the parameters of the real world. However, the success of the experimental systems and the uniquely designed built environments of the project are living testimony to the fact that the creative processes initiated by Walt Disney offer valuable lessons to creative people in any field. While Paolo

Soleri toils over Arcosanti in Arizona, Disney has already sold its heavily-tested WEDWay Peoplemover System to improve traffic flow at a major airport in neighbouring Texas.

In essence, EPCOT Center will now provide the medium in which the various projects and concepts experimented with at Walt Disney World and beyond can be explained, evaluated and discussed — enhanced with a touch of entertainment. It is indeed hard to believe that EPCOT might not have been possible without that mouse that started it all. However, it took a certain kind of determination to breathe life into a two-dimensional drawing — the same determination that brought Disney to believe that one could indeed solve the problems of man and his survival on this planet. It was his deep understanding of people that allowed him to use his imagination with confidence and consistently bring successful creative solutions out of his mind, onto paper and into physical reality. In this way, he can inspire all creative people to shoot for the stars and truly 'make dreams come true':

Somehow I can't believe there are any heights that can't be scaled by man who knows the secret of making dreams come true. This special secret, it seems to me, can be summarized in four C's. They are Curiosity, Confidence, Courage and Constancy.... When you believe in a thing, believe it all the way....<sup>10</sup>

Walt Disney

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#### Notes

1. Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney, An American Original*, New York, 1976, p. 358-359.
2. Thomas, p. 333-334.
3. *The Story of Walt Disney World*, Commemorative Booklet, 1st ed., p. 14.
4. Thomas, p. 338.
5. Thomas, p. 348.
6. Thomas, p. 357.
7. *The Story of Walt Disney World*, p. 14.
8. *The Story of Walt Disney World*, p. 18.
9. R. Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, 2nd ed., New York, 1970, p. 47-48.
10. Edward L. Prizer, "Countdown for EPCOT," *Orlando Magazine*, May, 1982, p. 63.

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