



## **MALLTOPIA THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING**

When Walt Disney created Disneyland, his idea was not to create the largest theme park resort in the world. It was to invite people from all over the world to share in the experience of a story – A story that they could walk around and explore, interact with characters, and let their imagination run wild. Disney’s original concept was of a permanent family fun park without the negative element that traveling carnivals often attracted. He developed the idea during his many outings with his daughters, when he realized that there were no parks with activities that adults and children could enjoy together.

At the same time, people had written letters to Walt Disney about visiting the Disney Studio lot and meeting their favorite Disney character. Disney realized that a movie studio had little to offer to the visiting fan, and began ideas of building a site for tourists to visit and interact with his beloved Disney characters set in statue form. He did his research, traveling the United States, and visited buildings of America's most prolific inventors and creators, such as Thomas Edison's Workshop, the Wright Brothers Bicycle shop, and the home of the Dictionary magnate Noah Webster. Disney wanted to see what made a place so magical to visit, where visitors would feel like first class citizens and guests, and want to return.

Disneyland was not the first major amusement park, nor the biggest, nor the most technologically advanced, so what makes it special? Unlike the subsequent theme amusement parks that followed (Paramount Canada's Wonderland, Six Flags) the rides play a secondary role in Disneyland – the exploration of the stories and the journey through the WORLD of Disney comes first.

The commercialized, adult version of Disneyworld evolves into the Las Vegas strip, Nevada's one stop vacation, shopping, entertainment, and gambling destination. Las Vegas is not only home to many of the world's largest casinos; they are among the most beautifully designed compelling experiences. The Aladdin is home to The Desert Passage, a Moroccan-style shopping mall to match the Arabian Nights hotel & casino. The idea of integrating a theme – be it the local hustle and bustle feel of a esplanade/promenade/flea market/bazaar, to an extravagant and complex theme like Arabian Nights or Treasure Island – into a mall is about creating the shopping experience into an extraordinary journey. When we apply the idea of creating an immersive storytelling experience that grabs people's imaginations, we discover it's not about what you can do to the mall. It's about who you become in the mall.



***Here you leave today and enter  
the world of Yesterday,  
Tomorrow and Fantasy  
- Disneyland Opening***

During the course of the workshop at the Beal, we talked of the ideal shopping mall experience imbuing a sense of freedom or liberation, through services that allow shoppers to walk around unencumbered. This principle not only applies to the physical objects they cart around (coats, bags, and strollers) but the mental as well. Freedom from the everyday world – at this mall, they do not worry about what they had to do in order to get here, and they do not worry about what tasks are waiting for them when they have to leave. Actually, in an ideal mall scenario, they won't want to leave. When Disney was observing other amusement parks during the conceptual phase of Disneyland, he observed people's reactions to different rides, and noticed how children's parents had nothing to do and would be anxious to go home. Now the scenario seems to have flipped, where tired and bored children are whining and want to leave, while frustrated parents (and other annoyed shoppers) try to shop.

Having a well maintained and well loved mall is how to create reciprocated love from shoppers. Disney often visited Disneyland a few times a week, many times late at night, when no one was there. When he came before the park opened, he would make sure the park was clean, and talk with the cast members. He didn't just build a park and say 'okay, well that's that.' He took care of it – Disney always wanted to know everything that was going on in the park. He knew about everything. He knew where water pipes were, how tall buildings were, and everything about how the park ticked. As a result, visitors would come in the morning and be welcomed by fresh and fully-functioning facilities, and because they weren't bored, worried, or disgusted, all they had was fun.

Holt Renfrew works the same way. Unlike other stores with racks of merchandise thrown about the floors or tossed haphazardly on a rack, the floor of Holt Renfrew is always a little chaotic – buzzing with shoppers, girly gossip, excited *oohs* and *aaahs* over a new collection – but never disorganized. In fact, shoppers at Holt Renfrew will actually put clothes they don't intend to purchase on the appropriate rack outside the change rooms. This is not a common scenario, but when one looks at the level of care that has gone into organizing any given floor of Holt Renfrew, it's no surprise. The meticulous upkeep of the place is systematic but not impersonal, like a dream walk-in closet of a close girlfriend (which is especially exciting, if her closet is the size of a floor on Holt Renfrew) while the details reflect incredible consideration for quality, down to the pink monogrammed crest on the plush paper towels. Because the store's attitude reflects care and commitment, the shoppers do too – who would take something out and not put it back where it belonged if they were a guest in someone's home – or closet?



An ideal mall experience requires the creation of incentives, whether they are tangible compliments of the mall (drinks, coupons) or in the architecture (wayfinding, hygiene, clean lavatories). They are Thank You cards from the mall, for being here with us in this space, and participating in our storytelling. But the biggest incentive for returning shoppers goes beyond free beverages and comps – it's the experience of participating in a fantasy. Holt Renfrew is not about shopping, it's about shopping *at Holt Renfrew*. It's not about the things you get, but the character you get to take on for the duration of the time. It's transformation.

Instead of going to the Eaton Centre and getting essentially the same result that would be expected from Yorkdale, who a shopper can become for the duration of the time becomes unique personas in an environment they trust. Shoppers no longer have to look for a 'storefront' or a 'story'; everything will be the story, from the attractive people walking around wearing / doing / using products from the mall, as they would in the backdrop of a storybook, to the physical market relationships that establish there, the body language, the smells. And having "tagging" options, whether its pictures and videos to upload later to Flickr or Youtube, or book marking special items for their friends to check out later, means they can share their epic journey with others.

A mall should be about great experience from head to toe, be it in the seamless integration from parking to shopping space, clean and pleasant bathroom solutions, comfortable ambience, to practicality in way-finding and navigation, but one thing that ties them together – that the shopper is a key player in the narrative that they can only experience in this mall – is invaluable. When we see the fantastical films by George Lucas, Peter Jackson, or Steven Spielberg, we engage in an imaginative contract with them, agreeing to suspend our disbelief for the duration of the experience, and sometimes beyond it. The contract is our imagination, that for those three hours, Hobbits and Harry Potters exist, and Hogwarts is possible. And when we engage in this contract, we expect both the promise of a story and a compelling delivery. The mall should deliver the same.

In Disneyland, you become a Princess or a Knight in shining armor. In Ikea, one of the city's chicest interior decorators. In Holt Renfrew, a Manhattan socialite in a huge closet. In the mall, or in this mall, who will you be?