

Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando. *By Richard Foglesong*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 288 pp. Illustrations. Cloth, \$27.95. ISBN 0-300-08707-1.

Reviewed by Susan G. Davis

Richard Foglesong's *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando* is not a study of the Disney Company per se, but a history of the relationship between the corporation and South Florida. In it, the author creatively combines urban planning theory, political theory, and business history to tell the story of how the media and entertainment giant became a major force for economic, demographic, and social change in what was once a sleepy rural area. Drawing on planning documents, extensive interviews, court documents, public meetings, and newspaper coverage, Foglesong shows in careful detail the local and regional political forces that accelerated the transformation of the greater Orlando area into the world's most visited tourist destination. *Married to the Mouse* is one of the best analyses to date of the relation between a corporation and the production of urban space.

As his title suggests, Foglesong uses the metaphor of marriage to describe a dynamic and interdependent relationship that changes over time. To my knowledge, this story has been told nowhere else, and certainly not in such careful detail. In the courtship phase, he shows Disney tentatively and secretly approaching political and business leaders about the possibility of consummating the deal of lifetime; a small coalition of growth-minded businessman and politicians was receptive. In Foglesong's view, the bargain arrived at is analogous to a prenuptial agreement, in that it conditioned everything that came after. Not only was Disney able to buy hundreds of thousands of acres at fire-sale prices, but the company was allowed to constitute a private governmental entity stretching across two counties. The Reedy Creek Improvement District, established before ground was ever broken for Walt Disney World, gave the company carte blanche discretion over most aspects of development, taxation, and governance, allowing Disney to define building and land-use codes and standards, issue bonds, and apply for public funds. Yet this district is based on the lie consciously promulgated by Walt Disney himself and his successors: that the company was building a residential community in the Experimental Prototypical Community of the Future (Epcot). In fact, Walt Disney had no intention of creating such a community because he knew its residents would expect to exercise democratic political rights. The fiction was passed off on Floridians so that Disney could control its massive land holdings according to the corporation's evolving needs, all the while remaining more or less within Florida state law.

Throughout the construction of Walt Disney World, and then Epcot, through the development of further resorts, and, finally, of the much hailed planned community of Celebration, Disney used the private district to insulate itself from county and local controls and demands. At the same time, the company fully realized South Florida's economic dependence on it and asked for continuing concessions (especially road and interchange building) from the local governments to further the expansion of its tourist mecca.

*Married to the Mouse* traces the relationship into a phase of conflict and abuse. By the early 1990s, the city of Orlando and the counties of Orange and Osceola were confronted with the economic and social effects of the recession-sensitive tourism economy. These included an employment structure that relied heavily on low-wage jobs, a lack of affordable housing, heavy traffic and long commutes, as well as an arguably underfunded tax base. As they struggled to hold Disney accountable for these costs, the company selectively alternated between its public and private identities to wriggle out of responsibility. The Orlando-area governments have had to rely mainly on public opinion as a force to constrain Disney; so far has the corporation been able to insulate itself from the constraints of law. Although the relationship has been adjusted, Foglesong does not see it as one between equals.

One of the many virtues of *Married to the Mouse* is that it treats this tempestuous relationship with equal respect for each partner's point of view. Foglesong takes great care to present Disney as a rational, if heavy-handed, actor, allowing the reader to understand the motives from which the large corporation acts and the constraints, as well as the great freedoms, within which it makes choices. Through extensive interviews, he is able to give some sense of the personalities and personal motives of the men and women behind the decisions, and this makes his arguments more convincing. It would be easy to allow the media behemoth to appear as a faceless force or cardboard cutout, and Foglesong sidesteps this trap, while never glossing over or touching up the problems Disney has created in South Florida.

Finally, the most important questions for Foglesong are theoretical: how to understand the nature of force, contingency, and constraint in city building. He opts for a model that historians will appreciate, one that emphasizes shifting and unfolding relations of power, rather than abstract market forces or unchanging economic laws. Although *Married to the Mouse* is heavy on the details of planning and decision-making, making it a daunting read for nonspecialist undergraduates, it is engagingly and accessibly written, and thus appropriate for upper-division classes in urban history and urban planning, as well as for specialists in urban studies. Media and cultural scholars will find it very useful, although short on analysis of Disney as a global entertainment corporation. There is little consideration of how the company's particular identity

(for example, the importance to Disney of “synergy” or cross-promotion) affected what Disney wrought on the landscape. Although Foglesong thanks the Walt Disney Company for access to their corporate archives, he does not fully discuss the problems of doing research on Disney (it is rare to have unfettered access to the papers of the notoriously image-conscious company, and some discussion would give us more insight into Foglesong’s impressive research process). Readers might also ask for more analysis of the physical environments Disney has built outside the theme parks, and the environmental damage done by its massive developments. But these seem minor cavils in the face of a thoroughly researched book and a carefully organized analysis.

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