

Disney and Arts and Crafts are irrefutably a bizarre paradox: the first connotes ingenious imagination rooted in ultimate fantasy, while the latter is associated with everyday life, utility and straightforwardness. Indeed, they seem quite contradictory at onset. So when Disney decided to build an Arts and Crafts inspired hotel, the Grand Californian, in February of 2001, as an addition to the California Adventure park in Anaheim, Calif., the paradox was well founded. However, in examining the ideals and aims of each, this irony turns into an unexpected harmony of concurring beliefs. Both Disney and the Arts and Crafts movement spawned from the will to ameliorate deteriorating social conditions, both share the desire to make their products available to middle-class persons, and most importantly, both aim to evoke comfort and aesthetic elation with their architecture and design. The fusion of the two has produced a reinvention of Arts and Crafts—not without overstatement, manipulation and surrendering to profit—yet admirably uncompromising in Arts and Crafts integrity and Disney’s dream.

The Grand Californian Hotel is a \$1.4 billion dollar project that took five years of planning to execute. Its chief architect, Peter Dominick of the Urban Design Group of Denver, drew from numerous Arts and Crafts architectural traditions in designing the hotel: Bay Area Shingle style, Maybeck, early Wright, Voysey and Mackintosh. The primary inspiration was Greene & Greene, whose renowned Gamble House rests in neighboring Pasadena. Because the Grand Californian Hotel is an in-park hotel (Disney’s first), it was essential that the hotel

agree with the park's theme—California Adventure. Consequently, there were two options from which to choose: Spanish Colonial Revival and Arts and Crafts. According to Michelle Gringeri-Brown in *American Bungalow*, the decision to go with Arts and Crafts worked for three reasons: “They felt no one had done it before, that it would blend nicely with what their colleagues were designing in the surrounding new theme park, and what better style for a company known for their level of attention to detail.”¹ Thus, the decision was made and a 751-room resort with a 20,000 square foot conference center was born.

One of the designs most obviously inspired by Arts and Crafts is bringing the outdoors inside. While this idea of ornament and pattern derived from nature is an underlying Arts and Crafts theme, it is also relevant to California and specifically what is authentic California Arts and Crafts authenticity. “The determination to establish an arcadia, the resolve to exploit the land (and society) to the utmost, the decision to create a mythical architectural past when there was none are the elements which have created the visual world of present day California.”² Disney ameliorated this idea of “exploitation” and turned it more so into a celebration of nature. In the Grand Californian Hotel, the use of dark wood, stained glass and natural patterns are prevalent. A prime example is the sliding door at the main entrance, which is decorated with an outdoor scene on stained glass. Further, the hallways have cherry-wood moldings and wallpaper emulating forests that incorporate real William Morris patterns. The lighting is supposed to

¹ Gringeri-Brown, Michelle. “Disney’s Arts & Crafts Showpiece.” *American Bungalow*. Winter 2001: 48-62

² Gebhard, David. *Architecture in California, 1868-1968*. The Regents, University of California Library of Congress: 68-63037. 1968: 7.

look like tree branches and rugs have green-leaf patterns. The two presidential suites are influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright. Dominating the hotel is a six-story “Great Hall,” which has a two-story, walk-in fireplace decorated with polished finishes, fine woods, and articulated details. The high wood beams and six chandeliers imitate the branches of an enormous tree. Chairs and rockers designed for ultimate comfort surround the fireplace. Just to the side of the Great Hall is the Hearthstone Lounge where one of the few Disney influences can be found in the hotel: hidden Mickeys in the design of the wood-carved chandeliers.³ This is an extreme manipulation of the Wiener Werkstatte/ Charles Rennie Mackintosh geometric cutouts often seen in their furniture. Robert Polidori of Architecture noted, “The line between architecture and scenography is sometimes blurred. For example, the complicated timber beams and the massive boulders are faux, and while the furniture recalls Stickley, it is mass-produced in factories.”⁴ (A valid point, except that Stickley mass-produced as well, even though his “Craftsman” image suggested otherwise.)

With all of these Arts and Crafts influences, the operative question now becomes: why did Disney choose Arts and Crafts in the first place, of all art movements, after which to theme the Grand Californian Hotel? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to first examine why Disney chose to theme its second park in Anaheim after California. In 1995, three-dozen people met in Aspen to decide on the idea for this second park. After the second day of collaborating, three prominent ideas manifested: a combination aquarium and

³ Shillinglaw, James. “California Style.” Travel Agent. 5 March 2001: 50

⁴ Polidori, Robert. “The Story King.” Architecture. March 2001: 84

water park; a park devoted to Hollywood and entertainment; and a new version of Disney's America transplanted to Anaheim. The team soon realized that all of these ideas incorporated a much larger theme, California, "which embodied a certain magic all on its own."⁵

Once the California theme was decided on, the reasons for creating an in-park hotel are fairly palpable. Disney followed the ideals of any large corporation.

According to Peter Rummell, the president of Disney Development:

We want to control the periphery. If we build a theme park in Long Beach, someone is going to develop hotels on the land across the inlet. We want to do it, so that we can incorporate it into our designs concepts, so that we can control what kind of development it is, and so that we can profit from it.⁶

Thus, the decision to go with an Arts and Crafts inspired hotel, over Spanish Colonial revival, was agreed upon. The process outlined above seems fairly logical.

But when examining the choice on a secondary level, the decision seems, in many ways, actually ideal. Both premises on which Disney and the Arts and Crafts movement are founded share essential similarities. First, both had the initial intention of creating aesthetic pleasure, spawned by a fear of a deteriorating social setting. For the 19th century British Art and Crafts philosophers:

[They] learned to spell out the cost of mechanical 'progress' in terms of human misery and degradation; they saw the destruction of fundamental human values reflected in poverty, overcrowded slums, grim factories, a dying countryside and the apotheosis of the

⁵ Eisner, Michael D. *Work In Progress*. Random House, Inc. 1998: 401

⁶ Eisner, Michael D. *Prince of the Magic Kingdom*. John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 1991: 228

cheap and shoddy. In such conditions, the good, whether in art or in life, was strangled at birth.⁷

The Arts and Crafts movement began in England as a sort of rebellion against existing social conditions that were detracting from the beauty inherent in nature and everyday life. Similarly, Disney's way of combating the blunders of 'free enterprise' in Anaheim was to create a place that allowed for an escape from reality—a way to leave the freeways, the smog, the crime and filth of Southern California and retreat to a land of beauty, peace and visual sanctity:

By providing overnight accommodations and other amenities for tourists, Walt was able to dispense with the Urban blight that free enterprise had also brought to Anaheim, in the form of cardboard motels and flashing signs for EATS. But the most interesting byproduct of [the hotels] was the intrusion of Disney theming into real-life experience ...guests slept and brushed their teeth in a place that pretended to be something—some place, some time—other than what it was.⁸

Disney tried to create a false reality while Arts and Crafts tried to make a new one. Both, however, were born from reactions to a worsening social climate, and in effect, both aimed to fill lives with the aesthetic pleasure that was unmistakably absent.

Regarding who specifically should benefit from these ambitions, Disney and Arts and Crafts, again, strike a common ground. William Morris ultimately wanted Arts and Crafts objects to be affordable to the masses—something that every middle-class person could enjoy. If Arts and Crafts designs were supposed to improve everyday life, what person more so than the middle-class worker

⁷ Naylor, Gillian. *The Arts and Crafts Movement: a study of its sources, ideals and influence on design theory*. The MIT Press. 1971: 8

⁸ Marling, Karal Ann. *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: the architecture of reassurance*. Canadian Centre for Architecture, for Texts. 200 Park Avenue South, Suite 1406, New York, NY 10003. 1997: 100

embodies the concepts of simplicity and respectability—fundamental qualities to the Arts and Crafts movement? Essentially, Morris wanted to democratize art. “I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few ... surely since we are servants of a cause, hope must ever be with us, and sometimes perhaps it will so quicken our vision that it will outrun the slow lapse of time.”⁹ Disney certainly fulfills this ideal of making a product available to many. Disney has drawn over one billion people to its theme parks, and with the opening of such resorts as the Grand Californian Hotel, it hopes to keep them there even longer. Disney’s plan is “to establish a state within a state, a private entertainment Mecca to which every working-family in America would be lured at least once and preferably several times.”¹⁰ And Disney has no doubt been successful, given that Disney World is the most visited vacation destination on the planet. However, a trip to any Disney theme park is no bargain, let alone a stay in a Disney themed hotel. A one-night stay in the Grand Californian Hotel costs between \$205 to \$335, depending on the season; and suites run into the thousands. Likewise, while Arts and Crafts objects were intended for the middle class, only the wealthier classes could afford them in actuality (due in part to the high price of hand-crafted objects). The bottom line is that a profit always has to be made in order for a business to stay in the game.

A final way in which Disney and Arts and Crafts parallel each other is in their ultimate desire to please aesthetically, in a straightforward, simplistic manner. “If the Arts and Crafts movement had any coherence at all, it was

⁹ Morris, William. “The Beauty of Life.” Centenary Edition ed G.D.H. Cole. Nonesuch Press. 1948: 564

¹⁰ Hiaasen, Carl. *Team Rodent: how Disney devours the world*. The Ballantine Publishing Group. 1998: 6

concerned with the quality of life.”¹¹ This, too, is the exact aim of the Grand Californian Hotel—to create a retreat, which, because of its Arts and Crafts influence, resembles a small paradise. The Grand Californian Hotel, unlike other themed Disney hotels before it, has little ‘Disney’ influence. Its purpose is to tell a small story of California art history, not a Disney fairytale. A stay at the hotel is supposed to leave the guest “emboldened and soothed” and help them to attain “reassurance and control”—it sounds like the Arts and Crafts movement all over again.¹² When the guest checks out in the morning, ideally, his stay will have enhanced his life. (And this way, he’ll come back again, too.)

The Arts and Crafts inspired Grand Californian Hotel is also symbolic of Disney’s “changing face”—its departure from being solely for youngsters. Disney now caters to older groups. Rock concerts now entertain the “high school set.” Roller coasters are being created for teenagers, the most recent being Indiana Jones Adventure. Also, there is entertainment for adults who come solo. There are “restful nooks” and shows without kinetic thrill.¹³ Therefore, it is these older groups that will appreciate the inspiration behind the Grand Californian Hotel.

Tangentially, the Arts and Crafts inspiration also subliminally caters to a new social phenomenon—the do-it-yourself trend. Arts and Crafts embodies the idea of uniting occupation and play. Its goal is “to improve quality, work and leisure, instead of being separated into different compartments as they were by

¹¹ Davey, Peter. *Arts and Crafts architecture: the search for earthly paradise*. Architectural Press Ltd: London. 1980: 212.

¹² Marling, Karal Ann. *Designing Disney’s Theme Parks: the architecture of reassurance*. Canadian Centre for Architecture, for Texts. 200 Park Avenue South, Suite 1406, New York, NY 10003. 1997: 83

¹³ Marling, Karal Ann. *Designing Disney’s Theme Parks: the architecture of reassurance*. Canadian Centre for Architecture, for Texts. 200 Park Avenue South, Suite 1406, New York, NY 10003. 1997: 198

the Industrial Revolution, [they] should be more related to each other. Thinking and making should be brought closer together.”¹⁴ At first glance, Disney seems to blatantly contradict this idea. A trip to a Disney theme park and a stay at a Disney hotel is a break *from* work—it is a vacation. It is a way to remove oneself from the tedious nature that can be everyday life; thus, in essence, it avoids the actual problem. However, California Adventure addresses this issue on a minor scale. Its solution is to incorporate an idea called The Workplace, which showcases how the products people use in daily life are made—including sourdough bread, chocolate, wine, and even the silicon chip. The point behind The Workplace is to exude “the excitement of watching products taking shape.”¹⁵ Recently, many Americans have developed a taste for doing things on their own. It is fashionable to do one’s own cooking and gardening—it is seen as leisurely and enjoyable. Thus, The Workplace is reminiscent of an older generation of Americans reflecting back on their lives; and thereby coming to grips with the changes that have shaped their present. It is another way for Disney to bring an increasing number of people through its gates.

Does this concept of Disney creating an Arts and Crafts inspired hotel really work? Is it really “a triumph to Arts and Crafts style,” like Disney’s brochures read? The best way to answer these fundamental questions is to begin with the first Arts and Crafts hotel, the Grove Park Inn, built in 1913 in Asheville, North Carolina. There is no doubt the hotel looks like an Arts and Crafts showcase, with natural wicker furniture, rustic porch rockers, hammered

¹⁴ Davey, Peter. *Arts and Crafts architecture: the search for earthly paradise*. Architectural Press Ltd: London. 1980: 212

¹⁵ Eisner, Michael D. *Work in Progress*. Random House, Inc. 1998: 402

copper lights, quartersawn oak furnishings, tile floors and oak woodwork. Not to mention the omnipresent Roycroft orb-and-cross. The Grand Californian Hotel too shares similar Arts and Crafts inspirations, but has been criticized for solely aiming to please its guests, thereby deficient of any provocation:

What the hotel lacks is the sense of conviction visible in Mackintosh's disciplined interiors, or in young Wright's devotion to craft. Those architects sought beauty, but they also wanted to challenge prevailing complacency by proposing a way of living that was simpler and more natural. The Grand Californian seeks only to please, which makes it an admirable hotel but not challenging architecture.¹⁶

However, is the primary goal of a hotel, Arts and Crafts or not, to “challenge” the guest? The creators of the Grove Park Inn did not think so, because “[their] primary intent was not to showcase the Arts and Crafts movement—it was to attend to the comfort of [their] guests.”¹⁷ This statement is supported by the fact that, over the past two years, the inn has undergone renovations costing over \$24 million, including a state-of-the-art spa and an Indoor Sports Center—none of which have anything to do with Arts and Crafts. So in aiming to comfort, please, and pamper their guests, Disney did get it right with the Grand Californian, after all. It really just had to emulate certain characteristics of the Grove Park Inn.

It is unfounded to critique Disney for creating an Arts and Crafts hotel that does not “challenge” its guests. While many Arts and Crafts designs and architecture should and rightfully do, hotels are an inherently different form of

¹⁶ Polidori, Robert. “The Story King.” *Architecture*. March 2001: 84

¹⁷ Johnson, Bruce. “The Grove Park Inn and the Arts and Crafts Movement: Yesterday and Today.” *The Journal: American Art Pottery Association*. January/February 2002: 12

enterprise. In order for the guest to enjoy his stay, comfort has to be the number one concern. Disney made the right decision in choosing to focus on the aesthetic principles of Arts and Crafts above all other facets of the movement. It is the only way to please the guest and simultaneously make a profit for itself. There is no logical way that Disney could rationalize handcrafting designs or trying to provoke its guests into thinking about the social and moral values of our time by experiencing the Arts and Crafts influence in the Grand Californian. While these are components of the Arts and Crafts movement, they were more often than not discarded. The Arts and Crafts movement had to use machines in order to stay in business. And many late 19th century and early 20th century craftsmen had to compromise and manipulate these ideals in order to find out what sells. The best example is how the American movement digressed from the British one in an effort to selfishly promote American imperialism. Disney, therefore, did exactly what the Arts and Crafts movement did to itself—it made changes based on consumer taste and demand. Ideals only carry as far as they are profitable.

The Arts and Crafts movement has invariably undergone massive changes over the past 100 years. What is miraculous is that it is still around after all this time. What seems to keep it alive is its ability to reinvent itself in various profitable venues—from the addition of a multi-million dollar spa at the Grove Park Inn to an entire Disney resort hotel.

Today, it is difficult for us to appreciate the urgency of this dilemma; the issues no longer seem so emotive, the need to make value judgments less imperative, and the problem of whether a machine can be or produce a work of art irrelevant. This determination to put the credos of the modern movement to the test has led to a more profitable collaboration with the scientific disciplines, to a relaxation

in the crusade for 'good' design, and to an acceptance of fun and frivolity in design.¹⁸

Disney certainly lightened the spirit of the Arts and Crafts movement, and in effect, the two actually share a symbiotic relationship. While Arts and Crafts helped Disney to create something representative of California, Disney helped Arts and Crafts to achieve what has always eluded it—the struggle to create something uniquely American—for what is more American than Disney? Their relationship works because the Arts and Crafts movement has proved to be unfaltering in preserving its essential qualities of beauty and pleasure, and those are timeless ideals that every individual of any age struggles to obtain. And Disney found a way to reproduce these ideals, which is why it just may be the happiest place on earth

¹⁸ Naylor, Gillian. *The Arts and Crafts Movement: a study of its sources, ideals and influence on design theory*. The MIT Press. 1971: 194