

# **On the hunt for utopia- Fake snow and cotton candy in the town that Disney built**

By Karoline Hjorth

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**“Come hungry, leave happy”. McDonald’s monstrous neon sign shows off its morbidly obese grin along the U.S. Highway 192 and the Florida peach sunset can only fight for attention with a red lobster-shaped car parked in front of it.**

An army of endless cheap motels, discount shopping towers and the finest selection of fast-food chains known to humanity make up the audience when 60.000 cars clog the four-lane artery between Orlando and the Magic Kingdom of Disney World every day.

The rumour is that New Urbanism Utopia can be found along this strip of asphalt, hidden behind the unrelenting shopping orgies and frantic theme parks. Its name is Celebration and it turns 15 this year.

Take a right turn onto the wide, grassy boulevard of Celebration Avenue, twenty miles southwest of Orlando, pass the shiny white fence and the old-fashioned water tower and you will find a town where ‘neighbours greets neighbours in the quiet of summer twilight... a place of caramel apples and cotton candy, secret forts, and hopscotch on the streets.’ At least that is what Celebration’s promotional material promises.

## **Uncle Walt’s social engineering experiment**

Erected next to the “Magic Kingdom”, Celebration was founded in 1994 on undeveloped mosquito-ridden swampland, shaped like a fat wedge of an American apple pie.

2009 marks fifteen years of utopian urban development and public controversies, and even if uncle Walt’s corporation giant might not be on top of everyone’s travel list, the grand scale of this social engineering experience is itself enough to warrant a visit to Celebration.

Designed as an attempt to recreate an idealized version of the small-town America from a forgotten past, Celebration takes on a surreal feel of a paradise of illusions.

Immediately apparent is the spotlessness, not a bubblegum paper is to be seen, the lawns are trimmed as a fringe, and even the trash is well hidden in narrow alleys running behind the pastel-coloured houses.

And the people are smiling. Everywhere. Jump in one of their small golf car-looking buggies called "NEVs" ("Neighbourhood Electric Vehicle" available at Wheelz of Celebration, 741 Front Street) and gleefully drive around town watching people smile until the head starts spinning.

Or go hunting down the “singing” manholes, where a constant loop of classical tunes from eerily familiar Disney blockbusters will entertain even the most stubborn of cynics into eternity.

### **Sugar rush and New Urbanism**

It is even possible to stay over in the town's only lodgings, the Celebration Hotel, nestled lakeside the man-made Celebration Lake ([www.celebrationhotel.com](http://www.celebrationhotel.com), double rooms from £120), fully fitted with sepia photos from Old Days Florida.

For the starved “cult of Mickey” and the nostalgic sweet tooth the ultimate celebratory joint for a decent lunch is at the 1950s- styled diner innovatively called the Market Street Café (701 Front Street).

Order from a menu worthy the very own Mother Goose and tuck into burgers, fries, grilled chicken, apple pies, shakes, homemade ice cream, sundaes and fresh cookies and brownies.

When the sugar rush takes a stronghold it is time to dive into the philosophical underworld of this New Urbanist experiment.

The biggest tourist attraction in Celebration is by far the opportunity to stare deep down into the psyche of the American spirit and the myth of the Great American Dream.

With their clapboard exteriors, cake- pastel colours, overly neat front porches and identically white-painted picket fences the houses in Celebration appear as real-life versions of Main Street, the epicentre of Disneyland.

### **Robert Stern's new EPCOT**

“Community events” are organised downtown throughout the year, with Posh Pooch Days for dog-owners to dress up as their poodles, fake snow on Market Street during “Christmas season”(bubbly foam blown from machines on the lampposts) and fake autumn leaves for Thanks Giving (plastic leaves from same machines).

Celebration's own Preview Center across the square from the Town Hall provides a surreal insight into the ideas of the puppeteering master- planners.

Designed by the late Charles Moore the Preview Centre is the tallest building in town and almost resembles a church with its sky-high tower at the front.

A white wooden staircase flows around the tower initially intended to lead to a viewing area where visitors and Celebrationistas alike could enjoy the view over the alligator-infested swamplands.

Ironically, one cannot climb higher than the third storey due to the master plan's strict zoning policy.

Celebration's master plan was developed by cherry-picked architects like Charles Moore and Robert Stern and draws heavily on Disney's futuristic vision for EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow). Re-designed to accommodate for the New Urbanism approach to community building, five principles form the underriding mantra of *Celebrationism*: Health, education, technology, community, and a sense of place.

### **Architectural pastel cocktail at a cost**

This sense of place is promptly summed up in *The Pattern Book*, containing the five sizes of homes to pick-n-mix from and the lists of restrictions that apply to home exteriors and yards.

Any Celebrationista-to-be may choose from six exterior styles, depending on the wallet: Classical, Colonial Revival, French, Coastal, Mediterranean and Victorian.

Colonial Revival is by far the most popular, and by far the more affordable choice too. Interestingly, the vast majority of the town's residents are rather well-off and white, not due to any sinister ideology but simply because 'a piece of dream comes at a cost'.

The minimum-wage workers in Celebration's Market Street shops can rarely afford to live there, and ironically enough Celebration's happiness hunters and defenders of environmentally friendly community living end up commuting just as much as the suburban sprawlers up the road.

As Catherine Collins poignantly explains in her book *Celebration U.S.A* after living one year in Celebration: "Celebration mirrors the worst aspects of suburbia, in that its all-mod-cons utopia is only achieved at the expense of an escape from the rest of the human race."

Celebration is a destination for anyone with a healthy crush on smoke and mirrors, eager to explore the Sunshine State beyond the garish strip of frantic theme parks.

#### **GOOD TO KNOW**

**Virgin Atlantic** is the main airline from the UK to Florida. Fly from London to Orlando and Miami, or from Manchester to Orlando from £329 on selected June bookings.  
Tel: 0870 574 7747  
[www.virgin-atlantic.com](http://www.virgin-atlantic.com)

**British Airways** flies from London to Orlando, Miami and

Tampa. June fares run from £360 return.

Tel: 0870 850 9850

[www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)

**The Vacations Group** specialises in tailor-made holidays throughout Florida, tel: 01582 469661; [www.vacationsgroup.co.uk](http://www.vacationsgroup.co.uk)

**Bon Voyage Travels & Tours** offers specialist holidays in and around Orlando, Miami and the Gulf Coast with a focus on self-catering hotels. Tel: 0800 316 3012; <http://www.bon-voyage.co.uk/>

**Celebration Hotel** (001 407 566 6000; [www.celebrationhotel.com](http://www.celebrationhotel.com); doublerooms from £125).

If you plan to explore more than Disney's man-made social experiments, have a look at car-rental companies such as [www.dollar.com](http://www.dollar.com), who will not charge you for one-way drop-offs within the state.

For postmodern inspiration: Watch The Truman Show (Award-winning film from 1998)