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Estate in Koh Samui.
(Photo: Karen Green)

Theming the Condo

In this essay, *Peter Benz* examines the notion of a gated community and argues why "security"—the shared value of the condominium inhabitants—may be nothing more than a matter of product differentiation.

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Images as credited

In late 1864, during the American Civil War, Major General William Tecumseh Sherman led his Unionist army of 62,000 men from Atlanta to besiege and ultimately capture Savannah—both cities in Georgia—in what was to become known as "Sherman's March to the Sea." During the campaign, while civilian losses remained relatively low, Sherman's scorched earth policies inflicted an estimated US\$100 million dollars (US\$1.3 billion at today's rate) in damages to industry and infrastructure, which effectively destroyed the South's physical and psychological capacity to wage war, and significantly contributed to the Union's victory in 1865. From the ashes of this tragedy 130 years later, grew the town of Celebration, Florida.

The thoughtful reader will notice that the end of this narrative doesn't make much sense, not least because throughout the whole war neither Sherman nor his army ever set foot into Florida. In fact, Celebration lies 500 kilometres south of the most Southern point of Sherman's March. But even if he had been there, what would that have to do with the foundation of a new town by Disney Corporation more than a century later? And how would the disaster of war justify the rather upbeat name of that foundation, in particular in the state of Florida, which was part of the Confederation (i.e. the losers of the war)?

It may be for this unfortunate implausibility that this (hi)story of Celebration's conception in the end was discarded, when Disney Corporation's Imagineering

Department were developing what was supposed to become one of the first corporate towns and probably the best known "condo" in the world. In the end Disney settled for something less defined—without such catchy foundation myth, but equally history-charged—as laid out in "The Pattern Book," which regulates every aspect of architectural and horticultural articulation in the entire town—no exceptions negotiable. For example, it stipulates exclusively building in styles pre-1930, thus denying the existence of Modernism. Yet, funnily it allows quite decidedly "postmodernist" public buildings, which then however are called "neo-traditional."

In the case of Celebration, the scheme to place the community in a historical continuum is particularly elaborate, professionally done, and excessively authoritarian, but certainly it is not unique, as made evident by plenty of stylistically misguided condos with strange historicised names around the world. Where does this tendency come from?

In many ways a "condominium" or "gated community" is an intentional community just like other such communities. Communes, kibbutzim, ashrams, artist colonies, eco retreats—all of these and others are planned residential communities in which people who share similar social, political, religious, or spiritual views, and the wish for a distinct lifestyle separated themselves residentially, though not necessarily geographically, from the rest of society. Often this is

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entirely agreeable, sometimes even highly successful (Harmony Society, Kommune 1, Woppswede, Skagen), though in certain cases it goes very wrong (Colonia Dignidad, Jonestown, Waco).

However, rather than any shared spirituality, the shared value of the condominium is "security." A condominium is essentially built on the belief that "inside is safer than outside"; its entire layout and operation are committed to this very notion. Security in this context is not merely absence of crime, but also absence of everything that puts in question—even merely visually—the intended lifestyle of the residents: annoyances in the guises of solicitors and canvassers, mischievous teenagers, outsiders, and strangers of any kind (malicious or not) are excluded.

While the belief in, and wish for, security is probably equally valid to some other belief systems that result in intentional communities, "security membership" is not something to be determined through social, religious, or spiritual rituals. Yet, new members of an intentional community are typically selected by the community's existing membership by means of a standardised selection process leading to formal acceptance into the community through an initiation of some sorts. Such a process is necessary to ensure that the common values of the community are indeed shared, maintained, and disseminated.

In the case of the condominium, the initiation is, by default, outsourced to developers, their foot soldiers—the real estate agents, and banks, as the notion of security in relation with condominiums is directly proportional to the income of a potential resident: the more you earn, the safer it is to let you in. The

initiation equals the purchase of ownership at a certain target price and submission to a particular "lifestyle codex." This rather straightforward capitalist attitude is established already in the term "condominium," which translates as "shared right of ownership."

Unlike real cities—and suburbs—that grew over time and gradually developed their identity, condos are products, commoditised entities that are purchased for their functionality, in this case "security." Yet, while security is a valid product function, it is not a very sexy sales pitch; if security became also the visual paradigm of the condominium, how would it be different to a prison or a zoo compound? The appearance of (sub) urbanity therefore needs to be maintained—or, in the case of the condominium, it usually needs to be constructed in the first place, in developer terms: the condo needs to be "themed."

In his study *The Theming of America*¹, the urban sociologist Mark Gottdiener argues that in order to stimulate the consumption of largely identical goods and services, they are artificially differentiated through added themes, which have little functional relationship with the original good or service. Gottdiener applies this observation to built entities like shopping malls, theme parks, fast food franchises, and subsequently distinguishes ten recurring themes he found throughout these: (1) status; (2) tropical paradise; (3) the Wild West; (4) classical civilisation; (5) nostalgia; (6) Arabian fantasy; (7) urban motif; (8) fortress architecture; (9) modernism and progress; (10) representations of the un-representable.

In order to "theme" a condominium, a generic theme must first be established. Then the impressions of the



condominium need to be harmonised with positive cues of the theme (building style, décor, staff uniforms, etc.) and all negative cues (outsiders) need to be eliminated. Finally the experience needs to be "socialised," i.e. communicated to others in order to develop a reputation that will (1) invite suitable potential "members" to consider joining, and (2) further scare away those un-wanted.

Assuming that a theme will usually already be established in the condominium's name, a quick survey of recent condo openings in Hong Kong unearths amongst others the "Palatial Crest," the "Regence Royale," the "Wings," the "Avignon," the "Hermitage," the "Balmoral," and the "Palazzo"—the latter having become particularly notorious for its blatantly misleading themed TV ads that are all about young Westerners in Renaissance costumes frolicking about the green ranges of Tuscany on horseback. (Look it up on Youtube; it is truly grotesque). If merely the names and advertisements can be taken as indicators, it appears Gottdiener's principal observation and—in variation—his theme list have relevance for condominiums also.

There is, however, a final twist to this line of argument: the security of condominiums is essentially a matter of belief only, many studies into the subject indicate that condos are by no means safer than comparable "non-gated" communities. The only difference between the condo and a normal residential area is that condo residents "feel safer" than their counterparts outside. But in the end, reality bites back even in the safest of places: in November 2010, Celebration, Florida saw its first murder case and its first suicide case within just one week—despite such incidents obviously not anticipated in the Pattern Book.

Thus, if security proves not to be a deliverable function, what initially was meant for product differentiation has effectively become the condominium's—and in a wider context, the city's—very core substance: the theme. The implications of that will change the way we live. ■

1. Mark Gottdiener, *The Theming of America: American Dreams, Media Fantasies, and Themed Environment* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).

2
The Orchard.
(Photo: Erion Shehaj)

3
River Run, Arizona, USA.
(Photo: Nick Bastian)

4
Dogtown Heights.
(Photo: Jeremiah Roh)

5
Sonoma Landing, Arizona,
USA. (Photo: Weidner
Apartment Houses)