




The Theme-Parking, Megachurching, Franchising, Exurbing, McMansioning of America

How Walt Disney Changed Everything

By T. D. Allman

Photographs by David Burnett

Buyers of homes along Orlando's Old Patina Way get to choose from an array of earth-toned colors.



Orlando is the new American metropolis.

Everything happening to America today is happening here, and it's far removed from the cookie-cutter suburbanization of life a generation ago. The Orlando region has become Exhibit A for the ascendant power of our cities' exurbs: blobby coalescences of look-alike, overnight, amoeba-like concentrations of population far from city centers. These huge, sprawling communities are where more and more Americans choose to be, the place where job growth is fastest, home building is brisk, and malls and megachurches are multiplying as newcomers keep on coming. Who are all these people? They're you, they're me, and increasingly, they are nothing like the blue-eyed "Dick and Jane" of mythical suburban America.

Orlando's explosion is visible in every shopping mall and traffic jam. You can also see it from outer space. When Earth satellites were first launched, Florida photographed at night looked like two *l*'s standing side by side: One long string of lights ran down the Atlantic side of the peninsula; another ran along the Gulf of Mexico side. In between was darkness. Today the two parallel *l*'s have become a lopsided *H*. Central Florida glows as though a phosphorescent creature from outer space has landed there and started reproducing. It gobbles up existing communities even as it transforms scrub and swamp into a characterless conurbation of congested freeways and parking lots. All of this is "Orlando," the brand name for this region of two million residents.

When people tell the story of Orlando's stunning transformation from swamp and sinkhole to 21st-century metropolis, they begin, inevitably, with the man and the mouse. The mouse

is Mickey, the man Walt Disney. If it weren't for Disney, the local saying goes, the Orlando region would be called Ocala, a rival town up the road. Disney first flew over central Florida in an airplane chartered under an alias to keep his mission secret. It was the fateful day of November 22, 1963. The Kennedy assassination would mark America forever. So would the decision Walt Disney made that day to turn an inland Florida agricultural center into an epicenter of world tourism.

Orlando was the county seat of Orange County, but it wasn't citrus groves that prompted Disney's secret aerial reconnaissance. During his flyover, he focused on a wasteland southwest of Orlando where alligators outnumbered people. Porous limestone underlay the vegetal muck. What passed for dry land was speckled with shallow, brown-watered catchments, some the size of station wagons, others the size of suburbs. "That's it," Disney proclaimed, pointing down to the future site of what he dreamed of creating in this Florida wilderness: Epcot, America's Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow.

Over the next two years, with the collusion of Orlando's top leaders, Disney secretly acquired more than 25,000 acres. People were glad to sell dirt cheap. This sludgy terrain was useless for agriculture. It was far from Florida's beaches. It was hot and muggy most of the year, yet it got so cold during central Florida's brief winters that deep freezes periodically killed the citrus crop.

Who would want to vacation in such a place? Disney was certain most Americans would, once he worked his marketing magic on them. By the 1960s, all over America, suburbs were replacing

CAN ADD **6** POUNDS TO YOUR WEIGHT.

old neighborhoods. Malls were driving Main Street out of business. There was hardly a new ranch home or split-level that didn't have a TV antenna on the roof. Disney realized that in the coming decades shows like *The Mickey Mouse Club*, not climate and geology, would determine what the majority of Americans would consider a safe and enjoyable place to take a family vacation. That day, flying over central Florida, Disney decided that he, not reality, would define what constituted the Magic Kingdom in the minds and spending habits of millions of Americans in the years to come.

The interstate highway system, started by the Eisenhower Administration as part of the Cold War defense effort against communism, was already crisscrossing America. Disney chose Orlando because it was at the confluence of two of the most important of these new thoroughfares, what today are Interstate 4 and Florida's Turnpike. There was also a deeply personal reason he located Disney World there—the same one that still lures people to Orlando today. In Florida's boggy, buggy, empty midsection, Walt Disney perceived a second chance.

His original theme park—Disneyland, in southern California—covered fewer than 300 acres. It soon was ringed with the suburban blight that its success inevitably attracted—motels, strip malls, copycat amusement parks. Disney never forgave himself for not making Disneyland big enough, but in Florida he hoped to rectify that mistake. He set out to create an Adventureland where nothing was left to chance. Arriving visitors would not be permitted to choose their own parking spaces; smiling Disney characters would do that for them. In this new, bigger, better Magic Kingdom, water could not be the tannic brown common in central Florida. So Bay Lake was drained, the sludge removed, and clear water pumped into the resulting lagoon. Even dry land would be turned into another Disney illusion: As you traverse the theme park, you are

actually walking on the roof of an immense, underground control building from which the operation is run, staffed, and supplied.

Disney's new empire in central Florida would be marketed as Disney World. Its official name was, and remains, the Reedy Creek Improvement District. Thanks to a sweetheart deal with the state legislature, the lands Disney purchased were detached from the rest of Florida to form a Magic Kingdom, above and outside the law. Even now, Disney World's rides are exempt from state safety inspections. Democratic process is excluded, too. Power remains in the hands of a board of supervisors composed of Disney allies. However much you pay for a time-share condo in Disney World, you cannot buy property outright, and therefore establish official residence, and therefore vote for the board. Celebration, Disney's residential community themed to evoke pre-1940s small-town America, has a city hall but no actual municipal government.

The most telling theme park in Orlando isn't even Disney's. SeaWorld is populated with sharks and whales plucked from the ocean and transported 50 miles inland. (Marineland, Florida's original aquatic attraction on the Atlantic coast, is a fossil of its former self.) Every year, hundreds of thousands of people drive down the Atlantic coast of Florida and turn inland to visit America's premier saltwater attraction. SeaWorld bespeaks the essence of Orlando, a place whose specialty is detaching experience from context, extracting form from substance, and then selling tickets to it.

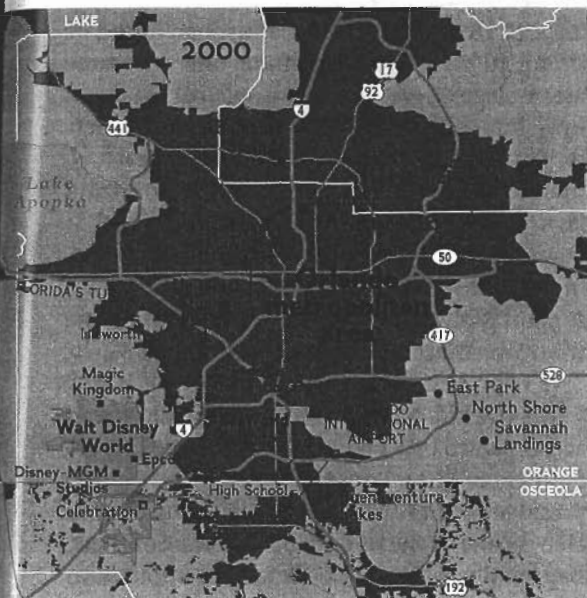
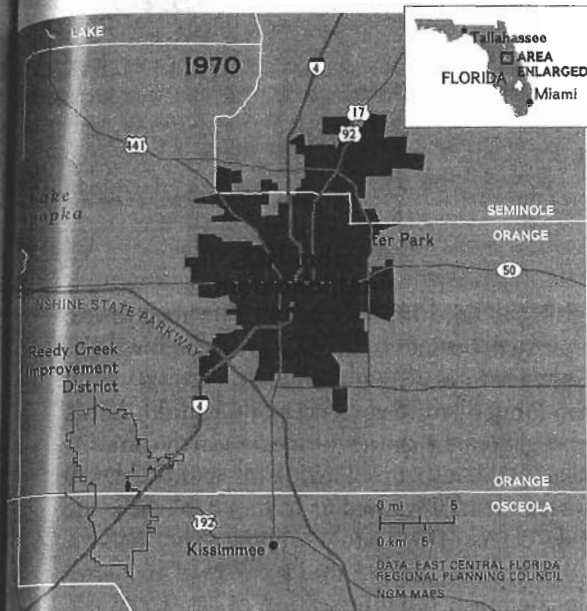
In this place of exurban, postmodern pioneers, the range of choices is vast even when the choices themselves are illusory. Here life is truly a style: You don't want to live in a mass-produced, instant "community"? No problem. Orlando's developers, like the producers of instant coffee, offer you a variety of flavors, including one called Tradition. Structurally it may seem identical to all the others. Only

...e roof of an immense, building from which the ... and supplied.

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instead of vaguely Mediterranean ornamental details, the condos at Tradition have old colonial finishes. In Orlando's lively downtown, it's possible to live in a loft just as you would in Chicago or New York. But these lofts are brand-new buildings constructed for those who want the postindustrial lifestyle in a place that never was industrial.

Orlando's bright lights are not the garish displays of Las Vegas or the proud power logos of New York. Instead, Orlando glimmers with the familiar signage of franchise America: Denny's,

ORLANDO: EXURBAN SPRAWL

After Disney World opened in 1971, "Orlando" became the brand name for the sprawl that is central Florida. America's population is decentralizing faster than at any time in history, and Orlando reflects the trend: In three decades the metropolitan area has grown fivefold in size. Growth is fastest at the city's margins, where the exurbs lure residents with larger houses, new big-box stores, and jobs in the suburbs rather than the city.

Burger King, Quality Inn, Hampton Inn, Hertz. Orlando also leads in the culinary transformation of the exotic into the familiar. From its Orlando headquarters, the Darden Corporation, the city's first *Fortune* 500 company, mass-markets theme foods. It standardizes the output of Red Lobsters and Olive Gardens everywhere.

All over Orlando you see forces at work that are changing America from Fairbanks to Little Rock. This, truly, is a 21st-century paradigm: It is growth built on consumption, not production; a society founded not on natural resources, but upon the dissipation of capital accumulated elsewhere; a place of infinite possibilities, somehow held together, to the extent it is held together at all, by a shared recognition of high-way signs, brand names, TV shows, and personalities, rather than any shared history. Nowhere else is the juxtaposition of what America actually is and the conventional idea of what America should be more vivid and revealing.

Welcome to the theme-park nation.

"I FELL IN LOVE with the sense of potential," says Rick Tesch, one of modern Orlando's boosters. "I saw Orlando as a great place to be, globally." Tesch could be talking about franchising car rental agencies. Instead, he is talking about religion. In the 1980s, Orlando's civic elite had decided it could be a leader in faith as well as theme parks. For Tesch, a devout man working for the Orlando Economic Development Commission at the time, the opportunity to lure religious organizations to the Orlando area was a privilege as well as a challenge.

One prime target was Bill Bright, the late

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PERCENT IN THE PAST FORTY YEARS.

founder of the Campus Crusade for Christ. Like Disney, Bright had started out in southern California; his spiritual enterprise, like Disney's entertainment enterprise, soon needed more growing space. Tesch set out to prove that Orlando was just the place for the Campus Crusade to put down roots. Orlando's Hometown U.S.A. persona was a draw. So was the fact that, in religion as in other fields, Orlando was on the cusp of mighty changes in America. Originally a southern prong of the Bible Belt, Orlando was morphing into a stronghold of Middle American spiritual as well as cultural values, a result of massive migration out of the central United States into central Florida.

God wants me to come here, Bright is reported to have said after an exploratory visit. So did the Orlando Economic Development Commission. Working with civic leaders and private donors, it helped broker a deal in which the Campus Crusade for Christ, in exchange for establishing its new World Center for Discipleship and Evangelism in Orlando, was given 165 acres of land, for free. The equivalent of Disney's Reedy Creek deal, it hastened Orlando's transformation into an important nexus of religious enterprise. Today dozens of megachurches and religious organizations, many with multimillion-dollar budgets, are located in the area.

The megachurch is the culmination, at least so far, of the integration of religious practice into the freeway-driven, market-savvy, franchise form of American life. The emergence of Orlando's largest megachurch, the First Baptist Church, from a small congregation into a powerful, wealthy organization, parallels Orlando's own transformation. The turning point came, as in many Orlando stories, when a sense of mission intersected with a real estate opportunity.

In the early 1980s, First Baptist's pastor, Jim Henry, believed the church should get out of Orlando's downtown. He had arrived in 1977 from rural Mississippi. "I felt this town was

going to take off. It had good connectedness: spiritual, business, political connectedness," he says. He foresaw that the old downtown would no longer be the epicenter of Orlando. At his instigation, the church formed a search committee. "I told the people looking for land, 'Look 150 years ahead.' I wanted us to move to where the new center of Orlando was going to be," he says.

When the group found a parcel of 160 acres located near the intersection of two freeways, offering access to both Disney World and the airport, Henry knew First Baptist had found its promised land. Today the church offers the same assemblage of green space, ample parking, and low-slung buildings you find in Orlando's better commercial parks and residential developments. Its growth has come from customizing its services to the needs of a community that craves a sense of connectedness. It offers parenting workshops, game rooms for teenagers, and support groups for divorced people. "We've done what Wal-Mart and football have," Henry says. "We've broken down the idea that 'big is bad.'"

His church's physical transformation has been accompanied by a philosophical change. "We are not here to dictate our faith," says Henry, a past president of the Southern Baptist Convention. He was one of the movers behind the Southern Baptist decision to issue a formal apology to African Americans for the convention's past support of slavery and segregation. Henry also opposed the Southern Baptist boycott, now lifted, of Disney World because of its toleration of openly homosexual visitors.

It's been a revealing journey, from a small Mississippi congregation to an Orlando megachurch that is not only bigger, but more diverse than seemed imaginable. In the process, Henry, who's now retired as pastor, has become an authority on megachurch growth management. His book *Dangerous Intersections* shows churches how to cope with their growth. As Henry explains it, one of the trickiest things about getting people to

Disney acted out the American idea that if you grab hold of enough wilderness, you can create a world free of problems.

worship is getting them in and out of the parking lots. At First Baptist, sermons are coordinated with the time required to get one congregation into their cars and back on the freeways. A system of color-coded signals keeps preachers from talking too long, creating traffic jams on the access ramps and chaos in the parking lots.

"You begin with faith," Henry says, and in his case at least, you end up as an expert in traffic management.

VERY FEW PEOPLE, as they talk about the immense changes reshaping Orlando and their lives, mention another American genius who left his mark here even before Disney arrived. Jack Kerouac—guru, bad boy, the literary superstar who wrote the Beat Generation's manifesto, *On The Road*—came to Orlando, by bus, in December 1956. The following year, in an 11-day creative frenzy, he wrote *The Dharma Bums* in an apartment with a tangerine tree out back, shoveling the words through his typewriter in the heart of hot, flat Florida.

Kerouac's tumultuous vision was a howling rant against the plastic shackles he perceived imprisoning the human spirit in mid-century America. Looking out his window at the neighbors, he scorned "the middle-class non-identity which finds its perfect expression . . . in rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time." Whereas Disney was looking for control, Kerouac personified the American urge to defy control. Disney acted out the old American idea that if you can just grab hold of enough American wilderness, you can create a world free of the problems that besiege people in places like the frost belt. Kerouac evoked a rootless America where, no matter how far people wander, they never reach their destination.

Never were two men so totally American and so totally different, yet both of them wound up

in Orlando. This prophetic convergence raises the question: When it came to America's future, who was the better prophet of what, since then, we and our country have become? As a people, and as a nation, are we more like Disney's smiling "characters"? Or do we more resemble half-lost wanderers, like Kerouac and his crew?

The answer seems clear: Around the world, Orlando is synonymous with the theme-park culture that has overtaken America. Nowhere else does the triumph of the Disney ethos seem so total, yet something paradoxical emerges when you get to know the place. Fifty years on, Kerouac's restless spirit is still on the loose in Orlando's discount shopping malls. It prowls the RV parks and hangs out at the fast-food franchises. Wherever people neglect to mow the grass, or curse the car payments, you're in Kerouac's Orlando because they, like him, were once from someplace else. And, for a while at least, Orlando seemed to them, as it did to the Beat apostle, like a place where the utility bills never get past due and the past can never haunt you.

"Why not come to Orlando and dig the crazy Florida scene of spotlessly clean highways and fantastic supermarkets?" Kerouac wrote Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the Beat poet, in 1961. But in Orlando, as everywhere else he roamed, Kerouac never did find escape. Florida became for him, after he stopped writing, a place to drink, and ultimately a place to die. The little house at 1418 Clouser Avenue where Kerouac wrote his novel now serves as a kind of literary time-share, where writers spend three months at a stint, hoping to channel Kerouac's manic genius.

Things did not turn (Continued on page 112)

1,210

U.S. PROTESTANT CHURCHES HAVE WEEKLY ATTENDANCE OVER 2,000—NEARLY DOUBLE THE NUMBER FIVE YEARS AGO.



More mall than cathedral, megachurches like First Baptist of Orlando serve as community hubs for decentralized cities. Its very size is a draw. "There's a sense of excitement, of something going on," says pastor David Uth.

“Just because we’ve ruined
90 percent of everything
doesn’t mean we can’t
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with the remaining
ten percent!”

—LINDA CHAPIN,
former Orange County commissioner

(Continued from page 103) out as Walt Disney intended either. People thronged to the Magic Kingdom to see with their own eyes what they’d seen on TV, but Epcot, Disney’s cherished project of creating a futuristic community where people lived and worked in high-tech harmony, never became a reality. People weren’t interested in Disney’s edgeless version of tomorrow. Epcot was such a failure that Disney officials faced the embarrassing prospect of shutting it down. Instead, they turned it into another tourist attraction. Today Epcot offers a nostalgic pastiche of a 1940s seashore vacation 60 miles from the nearest sea, along with food options themed to places like Gay Paree, a space ride, and “Key West” time-share options.

By trying to create a Magic Kingdom immune from squalor and complexity, Disney touched off an orgy of uncontrolled growth that still shows no signs of abating. Extinct theme parks litter the Orlando landscape the way dead factories mark the rust belt. Defunct attractions like Splendid China, which featured a miniature Great Wall, went bankrupt because they were too realistic. They failed to provide what all successful theme parks must: fantasies conforming exactly to what the paying public expects to get.

Today Orlando is a cauldron of all the communal characteristics Disney sought to control. In its Parramore district, you can stock up on crack, meth, and angel dust. According to the Morgan Quitno research firm, in 2006 it joined such cities as Detroit and St. Louis to become one of the 25 most dangerous cities in America. The result is armed guards at the gates of “communities” where entry is solely by

invitation. The Orlando area also has one of the highest pedestrian death rates among the largest metro regions in the country. Four decades after Disney’s fateful flyover, Orlando is a place of enormous vitality, diversity, ugliness, discord, inventiveness, possibility, and disappointed hopes, where no clown in a character costume can tell people how to live, let alone where to park.

ON THE AFTERNOON of Wednesday, February 2, 2005, thousands in Orlando got a shock when they turned on their car radios for the drive home. The Supremes had been banished; Kenny Rogers had been given the boot. Without warning or explanation, FM 100.3, Orlando’s famous “golden oldies” station (known as the Big 100s), had vanished. Rumba 100.3, new home of central Florida’s hottest Latin sounds, had taken its place. To oldies fans, it was as though Hispanics with boomboxes had somehow gotten inside the car.

The incident provides a defining parable of Orlando today. Twenty-five years ago, Orlando seemed a safe haven to those seeking to avoid the immigrants pouring into Miami and reshaping life all over the country. “Will the last American to leave please bring the flag?” the saying went. But as the sudden death of the Big 100s demonstrated, Miami was a forecast, not an aberration. Today there are about 400,000 Hispanics in the Orlando area—20 percent of its entire population.

The unannounced intrusion of Rumba 100.3 indicates something more than Orlando’s expanding ethnic diversity. A generation ago, Walt Disney’s secret decision transformed Orlando’s destiny without anybody being asked whether they wanted it or not. Now another secret decision, this time by faraway executives at Clear Channel Communications, the giant radio conglomerate, had determined what kind of music people in Orlando would hear. The growth of Orlando’s Hispanic population itself

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PERCENT OVER THE PAST THREE DECADES.

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was touched off by a marketing decision. Back in the 1990s, when a real estate company was having trouble selling property in a development called Buenaventura Lakes, their marketing department decided to advertise in Spanish in the major newspapers in Puerto Rico. Suddenly Puerto Ricans were flowing into the Orlando area—creating an alternative to predominantly Cuban Miami for Hispanics in Florida.

Today Orlando is as multicultural as New York, and as much in the throes of globalization as any import-export center. Its growth has brought people speaking more than 70 languages to central Florida. Kissimmee, south of Orlando and just east of Disney World, has gone from being a cowboy town to mostly Hispanic in less than ten years. The tentacles of diversity have penetrated Disney World too. Few tourists realize it, but when their kids hug Goofy and Minnie they might be embracing low-wage workers from places like Sri Lanka and the Dominican Republic.

Some complain the newcomers from developing countries aren't "real Americans." Others complain the newcomers from up north aren't "real Floridians." "We have drive-by citizens," says Linda Chapin, a former Orange County commissioner. People move to Florida, but they don't bring their loyalties with them. In such a situation of psychological rootlessness and moral detachment, the question isn't whether the problems arising from unchecked growth can be solved. It's whether there is any chance of them being addressed at all.

"We've allowed Florida to be turned into a strip mall," says Chapin. "This is our great tragedy." While she was head of the county commission, she played a major role in unleashing Orlando's nonstop building boom. She masterminded Orlando's new convention center, along with other projects intended to assure an influx of people into the area. "My name is in gold letters over at the convention center," she says. "It

makes my mother proud." These days, as head of urban planning at the University of Central Florida, she thinks up ways to slow down Orlando's growth, and humanize it.

Chapin is one of the very few movers and shakers in Orlando who was born here. Back then, of course, the lakeside house where she still lives was not considered part of Orlando. It was way out in the country. Today it's on the downtown side of both the airport and Disney World. Once this was Eden. Now the orange trees have been stripped from the landscape. Planes whine as they prepare to land at Florida's busiest airport. Nearby, South Orange Blossom Trail is a six-lane case study in ugliness, offering everything from wholesale adult videos to genuine south Indian vegetarian cuisine. Still, the old Chapin place has what people in Orlando miss the most: authenticity. "We are here; we are nowhere else," say the shallow muddy water, and the heavy air, and the Spanish moss with the little red bugs in it.

Chapin talks about the reasons why, back in the beginning, change and growth seemed like such unalloyed blessings. "We thought we could manage growth," she says. In her lifetime, a sky's-the-limit scenario has turned Orlando into a city of suburban, and human, dilemmas. Still, this is can-do America. As Linda Chapin, suddenly reverting to optimism, puts it: "Just because we've ruined 90 percent of everything doesn't mean we can't do wonderful things with the remaining ten percent!"

YOU CAN SEE Orlando's sprawl from outer space. Go to Cypress Creek High and Meadow Woods Middle School, and you see the human complexity in the eyes of its students. The sky was streaked dawn pink as I headed out to the moving edge of Orlando. Fifteen miles southwest of downtown, I reached the latest spot where central Florida's population explosion has turned wilderness into tract housing overnight. If the

10 WORKING DAYS A YEAR COMMUTING TO WORK.

moon were ever settled, this is how it would be done. Whole neighborhoods, consisting of hundreds of houses, arrived here instantly. So have the people who live in them.

Demographically, these two schools match the Orlando area. Here both whites and blacks are in the minority; "other" is the dominant ethnicity. I picked them because they are typical schools, but when I visited I found something extraordinary—two places where more than 8,000 students and teachers were finding new ways to learn, and new ways to live together.

At Cypress Creek and Meadow Woods, great events are not just things these kids and their teachers see on TV. They impinge on people's lives. At Cypress Creek, the assistant principal, Vanessa Colon Schaefer, was still putting her life back together after more than a year in Iraq. When her National Guard unit was sent there, she left a gap in the life of her daughter, and of this school. Kids from nearly 200 countries study at the two schools. "Normally they shout out their countries when I ask them," says Chuck Rivers, the principal at Meadow Woods. "But one time a little boy just whispered. When I asked him again, he kept whispering, so I bent down to hear him. He whispered 'Iraq' in my ear." Rivers adds, with no false sentimentality, "They're all my kids."

I talk to students from Colombia, Brazil, Haiti, Jamaica, Korea, China, the Philippines, Iran, Russia, Slovakia, and India—and I've just begun to plumb the mutations. "My mother is from Germany," one little girl says, "and my father is from Madagascar." Diversity is not an objective, or a program, or a lifestyle here. It is life.

At Cypress Creek I talk with the school's National Merit Scholars. I visit classes where kids are autistic or deaf or otherwise different. I sense how important it is for children to find themselves integrated, every day, with kids who

are different from them mentally, physically, racially, culturally. The principal of Cypress Creek is a woman; the principal of Meadow Woods is black. He remembers the days of racial segregation. Now he is in charge of a learning experience where racial barriers aren't the only things that have become meaningless. No dumbing down is going on here. At the middle school, kids are studying things I never learned in all my years of schooling: how to conduct a symphony, how blood circulates, how to fix a faucet, how to solve disputes openly and nonviolently. As we leave, the principal says something that sticks in my mind: "We do this every day."

ONE MORNING I HAVE what people in Orlando call the I-4 experience. I zoom off in my car for a midday appointment. It turns into an afternoon appointment by the time I get there. For most of an hour, every car sits motionless. For the first time I truly understand what people mean when they call I-4 "Orlando's parking lot." Nothing is more obvious than the need for a light-rail system connecting Disney, downtown, the airport, and points in between. But in Orlando people love their cars as much as they hate paying taxes. Orlando's roads, so recently slashed through the wilderness, are already deteriorating.

Being stuck in traffic gives you time to think; I wind up thinking about how different Orlando's image of itself is from reality. The irony of Orlando is that people go there in search of Disneyesque tranquillity—and by doing so, they've unleashed upon the place all the rootless, restless contradictions of America. Here is big city traffic, big city crime, yet people in Orlando cherish the idea that they have escaped the trials people face in other cities. On this morning, it is cold, so cold I turn the car heater to high—though at most times of year it is stultifyingly hot. Ahead of me is an overpass, and just to complete the refutation of Orlando's all-American self-image, a big semi lunges across the overpass.

➤ **Disney vs. Kerouac** Debate the pros and cons of Orlando's over-the-top growth at ngm.com/0703.

The gospel according to Disney is a message of self-fulfillment, of wanting something so badly that your dreams really do come true.

"Lucky Noodles," giant red characters proclaim, both in English and Chinese; it is carrying supplies for Orlando's Asian supermarkets.

For some reason the truck with the graceful Chinese writing on it reminds me of the lyrics of that old Disney theme song:

*When you wish upon a star
Makes no difference who you are
Anything your heart desires
Will come to you.*

"If your heart is in your dream," the song goes on to allege, "No request is too extreme."

Walt Disney was silent on the subject of religion; there is scarcely a mention of God in his more than 40 animated movies and none of his theme parks includes a church. Instead, the gospel according to Disney is an optimistic message of self-fulfillment, of wanting something so badly that your dreams really do come true. The results are visible everywhere you look in Orlando.

Orange County no longer produces oranges. Frost, disease, and development have destroyed the groves. What happens to the land once it stops producing what the juice ads once called liquid sunshine? One day I visit a former orange grove that is now named Isleworth. It is Orlando's most exclusive gated community. Homes sell there for millions of dollars, though the land—your typical lakeside lots—and the houses—McMansions ranging from the merely huge to the stupendously gargantuan—account for neither the prices nor the prestige. People pay so much to get into Isleworth because here too they are buying admission tickets to a dream. In this case the dream is rubbing shoulders with the likes of Tiger Woods. Arnold Palmer first bought land here when he came to Orlando, and in less than 20 years it has become Orlando's equivalent of old money.

Not far away, in Kissimmee, U.S. 192 is full of long-lease motel rooms for families who can't afford to lease apartments, of miniature golf courses for people who will never play at

Isleworth. The road connects I-4 with Florida's Turnpike, and it's become a dumping ground for everything, including dreams, that gets funneled down into central Florida. Near a sign offering cut-rate helicopter rides, the whirring machine sits, engine revving, rotors spinning, right next to the highway, on a lot no bigger than someone's front yard.

I might end this Orlando odyssey right there, with the great American getaway having left us all lost in Kissimmee, except Orlando has taught me that, even in the oddest places, the human spirit can be exalted. Orlando shows us that, despite our American urge to construct utopias, the real wonderland remains our diversity and unpredictability. At Cypress Creek High School, one student told me: "I found beauty in Kissimmee." Eric Strunz, a senior at the time, was a pilgrim lost in a spiritual desert when he found it. "A Buddhist temple, right there in Kissimmee," Eric said. "I took off my shoes and went inside. I loved the calm, the serenity. It changed my life. I realized for the first time there were other ways of understanding the world."

Later Eric emailed me the address of the Buddhist temple's website. I found out that Wat Florida Dhammaram wasn't another "attraction" with a Buddhist theme, where you paid admission to be herded through a cartoon version of a foreign culture. This was a real temple, built to serve the spiritual needs of central Florida's growing Buddhist community.

By leaving Disney World, I had at last found America's true Epcot, just as Eric had found his Kerouac revelation.

"The monk blessed me," he remembered. □