



RUTH SHELLHORN: LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT OF FANTASY

Inspired by weekend outings with his two daughters to the carousel at Griffith Park in Los Angeles, Walt Disney had dreamed for a decade or more of building a setting where families could spend time together. He began construction of Disneyland in 1954, a time when amusement park attendance had generally declined across the country. Disney had reinvented animation in the 1920s, and brought to Americans the idea of wish-fulfillment through fantasy in his best films, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Pinocchio*, *Bambi*, and *Dumbo*. But by the end of World War II, Disney's reputation as an artistic interpreter of childhood joy and innocence was in decline. Intellectuals complained that he infantilized American culture. He was still reeling from the aftereffects of a 1941 cartoonists' strike that had left his studio fragmented. Lacking the intimate, creative camaraderie that had so energized him in the early years, he felt disengaged and restless, and he was looking for a new project.

Ruth Shellhorn and Walt Disney, Disneyland, 1955. Photograph by Harry Keuser. Author's collection.

In 1948, Disney took a trip to the Chicago Railroad Fair and made a stop at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, in Michigan. He came back home bursting with ideas for a new kind of theme park that would offer a total, all-encompassing experience, a realistic incarnation of an animated world of fantasy and imagination. What Disney envisioned went beyond rides, games, shows, and other diversions—he reconceptualized the amusement park as a fantasy world offering solace and escape from painful memories of depression and war, and respite from busy lives. He wanted his visitors to shed reality for a while, to embark on a psychological vacation. He dreamed of a park that would rise above the scores of other amusement parks developed during the postwar era because of the quality of its implementation and devotion to detail. He wanted a place that would equally delight children and their parents.

He got his chance in 1950, when the financial success of the hit animated feature *Cinderella* allowed

BY KELLY COMRAS

him to move forward. Within two years, Disney formed WED Enterprises and developed Disneyland from original sketches by art director Harper Goff. By March of 1955, Disneyland was almost a year into construction on a 160-acre site, with about 68 acres containing the most concentrated development. A general master plan was in place; individual rides, restaurants, games, and other attractions were in various stages of building. A sequenced entrance, beginning at the Town Square, proceeded into the park along a Main Street of Victorian-era

inspired by the zeitgeist of postwar freedom and individualism, and a salubrious Mediterranean climate. Many of her gardens, public and private, featured her signature “Southern California look,” composed of simplified, elegant planting palettes, bold forms, and colorful flowering trees and shrubs. None of Shellhorn’s projects had come close to the scale of Disneyland, however, and none was as creatively ambitious. But their collaborations had shown Becket that Shellhorn could exert a cool command over chaos, that she was a master at

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shops and buildings and ended at the Plaza Hub, which led to the separate fantasy realms of Adventureland, Fantasyland, Frontierland, and Tomorrowland. Different art directors in charge of each of these areas oversaw scores of architects, engineers, artists, set designers, contractors, and craftsmen, who worked around the clock to finish before the park’s scheduled opening on July 18, 1955.

Despite the rapid progress of construction on various parts of the project, Disney, ever the perfectionist, began to feel that some of the most important components of his vision were still lacking. The many different professionals building each section of the park were working independently of one another. Landscape design and planting plans were incomplete, and no overall pedestrian circulation plan was in place. Disney worried that the project might not “hang together.” He urgently needed someone who could help coordinate disparate elements and realize his grand conception—someone who could design such seemingly mundane details as the location of walkways and oversee the selection of trees and the placement of plants to create an environment that would suspend reality for visitors: a world where it would seem perfectly normal to stroll down the main street of a late nineteenth-century small town, cruise through a tropical jungle, visit the Western frontier, enter a futuristic world of dazzling electronic inventions, and then shake hands with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. He turned to a friend, the modernist architect Welton Becket, for advice.

Becket had recently completed several prominent commercial design projects with landscape architect Ruth Patricia Shellhorn (1909–2006). Well known in the architectural and landscape architectural fields, Shellhorn’s lush, sun-drenched landscape designs were

manipulating simple design elements to achieve a proper sense of scale, and that she possessed an impressive vocabulary of plant materials, often experimenting with their use and composition to great effect. Finally, unlike many other practitioners of her generation, she did not bring stylistic preconceptions to her work. She prided herself on being a client-driven landscape architect, detached from the modernism-versus-classicism debate then raging within her profession. Becket recommended Shellhorn, and only Shellhorn, for the job.

Shellhorn was exactly what Walt Disney needed at that moment. She took his distinctive vision of what Disneyland should be and helped guide it to implementation. The subtropical plants that defined her Southern



Prudential Insurance, Western Home Office, Los Angeles, 1961. Photograph by Douglas Simmons. Author’s Collection.

Disneyland is one of the most celebrated public landscape designs in the world, but it is not the only one of Shellhorn's to achieve widespread recognition. By the time she retired in 1990, at the age of 81, she had designed almost four hundred projects, including private gardens and commercial landscapes.



Aerial view of Disneyland, 1956. USC Regional Historical Photo Collection. Wikimedia Commons.

California look, for example, were compatible with Disney's insistence that the planting palette evoke an "Eternal Spring" (the phrase Disney used in a 1956 article in *Landscape Architecture*). But she persuaded him that he could better achieve his vision with the judicious use of a variety of deciduous trees. On this and many other matters he grew to trust her judgment.

Shellhorn understood immediately that the park's various elements had to be knit into a unified experience. She took on the task of organizing pedestrian circulation throughout the park, shaping and refining the size, alignment, and positioning of all the paved and the planted areas. This required a sophisticated understanding of how to move and manage crowds of people by focusing or screening views, narrowing or widening pathways, and highlighting intersections. It occasionally necessitated the relocation of large trees planted earlier throughout the park, which conflicted with her newly defined circulation plans.

Shellhorn then turned her attention to preparing sketches and detailed planting designs for the Town Square entrance and Main Street, where visitors would first experience Disney's idea of "the happiest place on earth," and she assumed responsibility for designing the planting palettes that would enable visitors to transition seamlessly from the Plaza Hub to the major "lands" that made up the rest of the park. These palettes utilized plant material in a masterful way to both differentiate and unify the elements of the park. Pine trees, for

example, made up the forest around Sleeping Beauty's Castle, and Shellhorn used the same trees in planting compositions in other areas to weave a botanical thread throughout the park. It is for this contribution that she is most recognized at Disneyland.

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Anyone who lived in or visited Southern California during the postwar era was likely to experience one or more of Shellhorn's landscape designs, although few were aware of the landscape architect who created them. She rarely published her work; when she retired only a small number of colleagues and clients knew of her talent and her influence. Recently, her reputation has been experiencing a modest revival. In 2010, a brief biographical entry was included in *Shaping the American Landscape*, an encyclopedia-style reference book about pioneering American landscape designers, and in 2011, Shellhorn's work was included in the Harvard University Graduate School of Design's colloquium "Women in Modernism in Landscape Design." Her collected drawings and papers are now archived and available for study in the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA.

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