

DISNEY TOWN

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[Sidebar: A family moves into the Walt Disney Company's new planned community of Celebration, in Orlando, Florida.]

[Following text to be placed at bottom of first page: “From the book *CELEBRATION, U.S.A.: Living in Disney's Brave New Town*. Copyright © 1999 by Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins. Reprinted by arrangement with Henry Holt and Company, LLC.”]

It was mid-July and we had been in the new house on Nadina Place about two weeks when the business with the porch came up. We had not noticed the lot lines on the survey map when we signed the papers to buy our house. The woman from the title company had not mentioned it. Nor had the mortgage guy from the bank. But our neighbor, who had sold real estate on Cape Cod before she moved to Florida and switched to selling time shares, spotted the mistake when she and her husband were closing on their house.

“On the survey I could see that your lot line came up within inches of our house and it was obvious that our porch stairs are your property,” she explained, sipping a Coke and wanting a cigarette. She paused and offered a pained smile. “So,” she said finally, “We thought maybe you’d just want to give us the easement.”

As you might expect, we were taken aback by the builder’s mistake. We told her that we would have to think about it and promised to let her know. We sat back and looked at each other with something close to panic. It was not enough that the builder had made this stupid error. Worse was the fact that he had tossed it like a live hand-grenade into our laps.

Celebration was supposed to be a happy place. It was almost a town ordinance that neighbors get along. Yet we faced what appeared to be a no-win situation – sacrifice a fair chunk of our tiny ten-foot-wide side lot, probably clouding the title and lowering the value of our house, or risk irritating our brand new next-door neighbors by making them rip out the porch, seal off a door, and move it all to the other side of their house, a process that would take weeks.

We understood the perils of proximity. In Alexandria, Virginia, our house had been just two feet from one neighbor, and separated from the other by a small courtyard. Soon after we had arrived in Alexandria, the neighbors on the courtyard side had presented us with a curious house-warming gift – a charcoal starter that used newspaper. They explained that the bothersome odor from the starter fluid we used drifted up to their second-story deck. So we understood the necessity of getting along in tight quarters.

Given our desire for good relations with our neighbors and the near-mandatory friendliness of Celebration, I said maybe we should just give them the easement. It was the least confrontational solution, the neighbors would be grateful, not angry, but would leave us with the loss of part of our yard and a problem when we sold the house.

As always, my wife proposed the practical approach. Granting an easement was a bad idea, but somebody else had to say that for us if we were to keep the peace. We needed to find a "bad cop" to counter our "good cop."

"I'll call the bank and that woman from the title company," she said. "Let's see how serious this really is."

The woman from the title company was surprised. "Whoa," she exclaimed. "This is a major problem."

The bank representative had basically the same reaction. He thought an easement might jeopardize the value of the house, possibly creating questions about the mortgage he and his bank had just underwritten on our property. He said he would talk to his legal department and get back to us.

My wife also called a construction supervisor with David Weekley Homes, which had built our neighbor's house, as well as our own. He wasn't in, so Cathy left a message explaining the situation and registering our concern about granting an easement.

The construction supervisor stopped by the next morning, appearing somewhat tense and edgy as he apologized for the error. He said that just before construction started, our neighbors had decided to flip the floor plan for their house. In doing so, no one had taken account of where the side porch would wind up. Contrary to what we had been told, he insisted that Weekley Homes intended to tear out the porch and rebuild on the other side of the house, where they had more room. The bank's mortgage manager called soon afterward, emphatically seconding the decision.

This was good news for us. We spoke to our neighbors that evening, explaining what we had been told. They said they had no problem with moving the porch. Everyone was happy again in Celebration, though it did take six weeks before the work was completed.

This episode also explained why garage had ended up on the wrong side of our property, blocking our treasured marshland view. This is because the builder working on our neighbors' house made it impossible to put our garage where it was supposed to be when he flipped their floor plan. To our great frustration, there was no compensation from the builder when we complained about the placement of the garage and the loss of our view (for which we had paid a premium).

In all honesty, the difficulties with our house were relatively minor. Our problems were mainly work that was not finished properly, something attributable in part to the race to build houses as fast as possible at Celebration. Fortunately we had learned the hard way long ago not to get emotionally involved with a piece of real estate. For many of our neighbors, however, these houses were more than real estate. They were the embodiment of their dreams and aspirations, the symbols of what they had taken implicitly as the Disney Company's promise that life would be better in Celebration.

ROCKY MARRIAGES

There were four religious organizations in Celebration but no church. A nondenominational group, which included Baptists and other religions, held their services in the public school cafeteria, which probably violated the separation of church and state. A Jewish congregation

met at the restaurant at the golf course, while the Catholics conducted education programs for children without church services. The Presbyterians held services at the AMC movie theater downtown.

Though we were raised as churchgoers, as a family we had never attended services regularly. Coming to Celebration offered a chance to give it a try. We started attending the Presbyterian service because, of the two denominations, it was closer to the churches of our upbringing and because the movie theater seats were comfortable. In fact, it must have been the only church in the county with plush stadium seating. The atmosphere was very casual. People came in shorts and shirts; anyone in a suit was pegged immediately as either a tourist or first-time visitor. You could even bring your morning coffee to services, resting it in the cupholder where the previous night someone had placed his Coca-Cola while watching *Scream* or *Good Will Hunting*.

One Sunday in the middle of August, the pastor was going through his opening ritual of asking the congregation to pray for sick members and others in need. Without a pause, he added an odd request. "Pray for those Town & Country marriages." (Town & Country was the other production homebuilder in Celebration.) There were titters in the congregation and he paused to explain.

"I know it may seem humorous," he said earnestly. "But some of our friends have been waiting a long time to get into their Town & Country homes. They go from apartment to house to apartment. People are living in a state of flux. This is stress. I've counseled more than one family since I arrived here last November. So put these Town & Country marriages in your prayers this week, please."

A few days later, the two of us sat down with the pastor over lunch at Max's Café, the retro-diner in the center of town. He is a self-confessed Georgia cracker who came to Celebration with his family to start the Presbyterian church. We asked about his reference to Town & Country marriages and how deep the problems really ran.

"One of the teachers at the school had a good word for what's going on," he said. "She said it was swirly time. This is a stressful time for many people. All of us are creating traditions as we go and it's scary. Town & Country has not made it easy for people. The inability to move into their homes has created additional stresses for many of these people and I've counseled them about it."

Town & Country had been building homes in the Chicago suburbs since 1958. The company, a family owned operation, had won several industry awards for quality and design. They had been chosen in part because the Celebration Company's head of residential construction had heard the owners of the company give several talks on architectural design. Disney had examined Town & Country's financial strength and interviewed several of its customers before picking them as one of the town's two production builders.

Despite Town & Country's good record, by the middle of 1997, the company was months behind schedule on dozens of houses, resulting in angry homeowners and concerned Disney executives. The worst delays were with the town houses that curved gracefully along Campus Street and lined two ends of Savannah Square. One frustrated owner had tracked down a painting crew at another building site and screamed and cursed at them. He then marched off to find the company foreman and repeated the outburst. Feelings were running so

high that Town & Country had hired a night watchman to prevent vandalism, and some town house owners were contemplating a lawsuit.

Part of the blame rested with the Celebration Company and its parent, Disney. Eager to capitalize on the rush of attention, the Company had pushed builders to put up houses as fast as they could. The problem was that the two production builders had more work than workers. In the case of Town & Country, the house designs were barely completed in time for the opening of the town. A tight general labor market exacerbated the problem, since a regional building boom was well underway. With subdivisions popping up almost overnight all over the Orlando area, there was a shortage of experienced workers. On top of that, both Weekley and Town & Country were out-of-state builders, without long-term relationships with dependable local subcontractors.

Weekley fared better than Town & Country, in part because the company had started building in the Orlando market earlier, hoping to be chosen by the Company for the Celebration project. As a result, Weekley was able to send supervisors and crews into the area two years before Celebration started to build houses. “We wanted to establish a good pool of subs before we started at Celebration,” one of the Weekley supervisors explained. “It made all the difference.”

The manager of Town & Country refused to criticize Disney, but told us that the lack of time for advance planning had put his company in a hole from the outset. “Looking back, we should have said that we were not ready,” he said. “Instead, we tried to honor the opening date. So not only were we in an unknown market with an unfamiliar base of subcontractors, but houses were selling out before we were ready. You end up with everyone really scrambling, trying to put things together.” In addition, the architectural demands of the Celebration homes put a strain on the production builders. Disney had prepared a so-called pattern book that described in great detail the required architectural treatment of the homes. Adhering to the standards of the pattern book was both expensive and time consuming.

Town & Country might have been better situated to deal with the obstacles if it had been making money in Celebration. There would have been a financial cushion to hire more workers and pay overtime to get things right. The former president of Town & Country’s Florida division said that the company had estimated it could build houses for \$62 per square foot, Actual costs came in at \$82 per square foot. When combined with the price the company paid to Disney for the land, Town & Country was losing money on every house it built, he said, adding, “Town & Country never understood Florida and they never invested in the people to make it work down here.” The president of the company declined to say exactly how much it had lost. “Celebration has not been profitable for us,” was as far as he would go.

FOXHOLE MENTALITY

Few people had higher – or more detailed – expectations than Michael and Marty, who had moved to Celebration from Sarasota in their continuing quest to find the perfect town. Both are architects and over the years they had developed a five-point program for evaluating the livability of a town. The points were deceptively simple, but they had refined them through years of observations and believed they represented the overt evidence of a healthy, interesting

community. There had to be a movie theater, a hardware store, good civic buildings, quality housing stock, and not too many antique stores (lest the town be overrun with tourists).

Only a handful of places met all the criteria. Beaufort, South Carolina, made the list, as did Charlottesville, Virginia, where they had studied architecture at the University of Virginia. Celebration did not meet all five criteria. It lacked a hardware store, for example, and there were lots of tourists, though there were no antique stores. What the architects did not discover until too late was that the quality of the housing, or at least theirs, was suspect.

Michael and Marty had initially planned to build an expensive custom home in Celebration, but in the summer of 1997 they were drawn to what was then the town's newest neighborhood, Lake Evalyn. The scale attracted them and so did the feel of the garden home district set on the man-made Lake Evalyn. The garden homes here were the smallest and least expensive single-family houses in Celebration, and had not been included in the original plans. Celebration Company introduced them as a way to keep prices below \$200,000 as the cost of the cottage homes skyrocketed in response to demand. The garden homes were small, less than 2,000 square feet. To keep costs down the builder had limited the number of options available. It was basically take it or leave it when it came to exterior colors and interior materials.

In many ways the Lake Evalyn district was the closest thing to a purely neotraditional neighborhood in Celebration, the kind of architecture and planning first introduced at Seaside and later called traditional neighborhood development or New Urbanism (see "(Some) People Like New Urbanism" *WRER*, Fall 1998). The architecture was the most vernacular in Celebration, creating a setting similar to a mini Key West. Streets were laid out on a strict grid and the houses were no more than five feet apart. Downtown was only a five-minute stroll away around the edge of the small lake and across a picturesque boardwalk through the swamp.

The concept was an instant success. When we moved to Celebration, in late June 1997, the Lake Evalyn site was an open field. Two months later the Celebration Company held a lottery for the fifty-six available lots, selling out immediately. Michael and Marty got the second number in the lottery and, when the family that got number one backed out, they had first choice among the lots and styles. They chose a two-story house overlooking the lake. "We wanted to take a production house and make it wonderful," Michael explained. "We wanted to learn how to deal with production houses because we want to do some of this, though with more authenticity and better quality materials."

What they soon discovered was that some of the garden homes were built with little attention to key elements. For instance, many of the homes facing Lake Evalyn, including theirs, had second-story porches that were installed with incorrect material. Plastic support columns designed to bear 1,300 pounds and for use on only single-story porches were supporting the weight of the second-story porch and the roof, which one subcontractor estimated was nearly twice the maximum weight. Some of the columns had twisted and bowed under the weight. The columns on the porch had to be replaced.

There were other problems. The house had to be repainted several times to get the thickness and uniformity that the architects demanded. Parts of the framing had to be reconstructed to make the house plumb. The list was so long that Michael wondered whether the houses would still be standing in twenty years. "A place like this should really be about excellence of the environment, and that includes the houses," he said.

Despite complaints about the construction, Michael and Marty love living in Celebration. They especially love sitting on the porch, just four feet back from the sidewalk. “Our porches are so close to the street that it makes them like little theater seats,” he explained. “Our movie screen is our front porch. We have such a wonderful framed view of the activity, particularly with the lake as a backdrop. It’s a wonderful parade. It is thoroughly entertaining.”

Almost everyone we talked to in Celebration felt much the same way: While the construction difficulties were troubling and annoying, the end result was worth the woe. There was even an unforeseen upside to all the consternation. The delays and the nagging problems created a shared experience among the homeowners. While certainly not the experience that the Disney Company envisioned, these common problems resulted in a common vocabulary. There was a vitality and even humor to the conversations. In an experience shared by residents of new towns and subdivisions everywhere, people in Celebration were eager to share the latest tale of woe and then offer one to top it.

“People actually bonded together in this foxhole mentality,” observed one of our neighbors. “We were all in the same boat. We’d laugh hysterically some days. We’d be laughing one minute and in tears the next.”

NOT PERFECT

One morning my wife bumped into the mortgage manager outside the SunTrust Bank. An outgoing man, he knew almost everyone in town. After all, he wrote the mortgages for many of them. He had observed some common building problems, problems that would have been familiar to new residents of most production-home developments. The difference was that no one moving to Celebration had expected these sorts of problems. After all, this was not just another development; this was a Disney dream town and there was no margin for error or omission.

“Because everyone is coming in and they are new to Celebration, the one common experience is the fact that they are building their houses,” he said. “That gives them something to start talking about. ‘How’s your house? You know those guys, they put my sewer lines in wrong.’ These things happen in production housing.” He confirmed that the house problems were creating a community bond.

“Some of these stories must be more urban folklore than truth,” my wife said. “Like the story about the crane that fell on the house. Or the house that was built without a connection to the sewer. Those can’t be true. They must just grow up from rumor.”

“No, no,” he insisted. “They’re true. The family that moved into a house and found out several days later, in the worst way you can imagine, that their sewer lines had not been hooked up. True. And a crane did fall on a house, it was a town house and the owners still aren’t in. True. And don’t forget the house they had to knock down and start over. True.”

This last one brought my wife up short. It sounded like the mother of all construction fiascoes and somehow she had not heard of it.

“Whose house was that?” she asked.

“You’re the reporter,” he said wryly. “Go find out. And while you’re at it, what about the house where the owners woke up one morning to find the neighbor’s porch in their yard?”

“That was ours,” she responded quickly, before remembering that he knew exactly whose house had the porch problem.

The importance of these mistakes and delays, it seemed to us, was not only what they said about the quality of construction in Celebration, but also how the community’s way of dealing with them reflected the genuine desire to make the town work. As one of our neighbors said, people could have sold their houses and walked away from the town, but many people recognized that the promise of living in Celebration embodied more than the quality of construction.

That was precisely the spirit we discovered after tracking down the people whose house had been leveled. It took a couple of days, but my wife’s sources at Bernie’s coffee shop came up with the answer. In the weeks after we moved in, she had started stopping by Bernie’s most mornings for a cup of coffee. The shaded courtyard, with its wrought-iron tables and chairs, offered a pleasant vantage point for watching the town and, when necessary, a good place for interviews. On the steamiest days, she took refuge at one of the small tables inside.

Every day brought a steady stream of regulars. Sometimes she spoke to them, sometimes not. Often ad hoc groups would form at one of the tables, trading stories about goings on in town and offering sometimes-acerbic observations. Bernie’s is a clearinghouse of information and gossip, and the natural place to find out, by quizzing a couple of the regulars, whose house had been bulldozed. Not long after, we met the unfortunate homeowners for lunch at Max’s Cafe. As usual with these stories, their tale was so unlikely that we knew it had to be true.

Ken and Patty had been living in San Antonio with their three teen-age children in 1994 when they first heard about Celebration. They were members of the Disney Vacation Club, a time-share operation with locations at Disney World, Hilton Head Island, and similar resort areas. The Disney sales representative mentioned the new town that Disney was building in Florida. When they returned for their vacation-club stay the following year, they picked up more information about the town and the upcoming lottery.

Ken and Patty had moved to San Antonio from Minneapolis, but they never really liked the Texas town. Ken had been the vice president of a small technology company in Minneapolis and his job was portable. Patty had finished paralegal school. In November of 1995, they were talking about moving, either to Seattle or somewhere in Florida.

“Christopher, our oldest, said one day, ‘If we have to move, can we stay in the warm weather?’ ” Patty recalled. “It was two days before the lottery at Celebration, so I flew down and entered it. We didn’t really know much about Celebration, but we decided to try it anyway. We figured if it didn’t work out, we could always move again. It was a gamble. We’d see how it worked out.”

In the Saturday morning drawing, Patty’s name was chosen as number twenty-two in the Village home drawing. But her lucky streak had a little further to run. Before leaving the lottery, she struck up a conversation with a lawyer who worked for Disney. He encouraged her to apply for a job with the company and he gave her a telephone number to call on Monday. “Don’t get discouraged,” he said as they parted. “Disney takes awhile. Maybe six months.”

Perfect, thought Patty. By that time, the kids will be almost out of school and we can all move here together.

On Monday she called the number, which was for the Disney Development Company, the division that created Celebration. She was told to drop by that day and she did, with her resume in hand. Two weeks later, the company called and offered her a job. By the way, the caller asked, how soon could she start? Everything had gone so smoothly that it seemed like fate.

Patty moved into an apartment near Disney World in February 1996. The family had chosen a Village model by Town & Country on a lot near the golf course, and construction on the house started in April. The Liles expected to be among Celebration's first residents by the coming summer. Ken and the kids moved into the apartment at the beginning of summer, but the house still looked a long way from completion. A June or July move-in was pushed back to late fall, but the builder seemed to be making progress. By the end of July, the cinderblock walls that Town & Country used to build the first floor of its houses were up, and the prefabricated roof rafters were dropped into place by a crane. Then the unbelievable happened.

"We came by the house one Friday afternoon to check on it," recalled Ken, with a grimace. "The whole thing was jacked up. Windows were torn out and they were using jackhammers on the foundation. We couldn't figure out what in the world was going on."

"Dad," said their youngest son, Ryan, "they're flipping the house."

Ken realized that his son was right. The workers were raising the house off its foundations and preparing to move it. They immediately called the Town & Country offices and demanded a meeting at the site on Saturday morning.

The construction supervisor tried to explain what had happened. The draftsman who drew up the plan to locate the house on the lot had put the attached garage on the right side of the house. Ken and Patty wanted it on the left side, to open up a better view out the back of the house. They had told the builder and the plans had been redrawn, with the garage on the left.

Unfortunately, the location of the house on the lot had not been adjusted to compensate for the new position of the garage. When workers started to pour footings for the garage, they discovered that the location on the left meant the garage extended three feet onto the neighboring lot. The solution, explained the supervisor, was to jack up what they had built so far, and flip the house around. It would result in the garage being on the right side, but the house would fit on the lot.

Ken and Patty objected, asking what would moving the house at this stage do to its structural integrity? How could the builders do this without telling them? And anyway they didn't want the garage on the right. Another supervisor was brought in and the builders and the prospective homeowners stood in a small knot arguing. Patty tried to call Disney Development for help, but no one was answering the phone on a Saturday. They told the builders to stop everything.

Working for Disney paid off. Over the weekend, Patty sent e-mails to senior executives with Disney Development and Celebration Company. Disney executives -- Patty doesn't want to say exactly who -- told Town & Country to make it right: Knock down the house and start over.

In July 1996, there were not many people living at the end of Sycamore Street where Ken and Patty were trying to build their house. But the town was attracting lots of tourists, and they liked to walk over to the golf course after visiting the model homes at the other end of

Sycamore. The prospect of a bulldozer and jackhammers tearing apart a house was a public relations nightmare. So Town & Country got special permission from Celebration Company to work at night, under spotlights.

“When we came the next morning, the bulldozer was kind of topping off the lot,” Patty remembered. “Nobody was around. Nobody seemed to have noticed.”

They finally moved into their house on May 5, 1997, nearly a year late. But they didn’t hold any grudges. “When you think about how many things have to work right to start a new life, the house is really a small part and everything else really went well,” said Patty, as she finished her lunch. “You get over the hump and you deal with it. It was a frustrating thing, and a lot of people have gone through it. But when you think about everything, it’s amazing to see how it all kind of fell into place. Worst thing I thought would happen was that the kids would move back to Texas or hate the school. But they’re still here and they like the school.”

After lunch, as we rode our bicycles back home, we talked about Ken and Patty's healthy attitude toward the house problems and life in general here. They had not expected perfection. To them, Celebration was a town with some cool ideas and infinite possibilities, not some version of the Magic Kingdom. They were willing to work to make the community a better place; both of them were active in town affairs, from their church and the school to Ken’s role as founder of the barbershop quartet.

We were getting to know more and more people in town. They were candid in responding to our questions. Those who seemed to be most disappointed that everything was not perfect, the ones most distraught by the roof that leaked or the house that didn’t get done on time, were the ones who had believed most strongly in Disney.

As Peter Rummell, then president of the Disney Development Company, had feared, many people had moved to Celebration expecting Disney to make things perfect. Their surprise and disappointment were inevitable. The question in our minds was whether these people would roll up their sleeves and work to make Celebration the place they wanted, or whether they would be content to carp from the sidelines. Good architecture couldn’t make the town work, and Disney couldn’t ride to the rescue every time. The people who lived there had the power to determine the future of Celebration.

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