PRINT

Suburbia lurches toward Tomorrowland

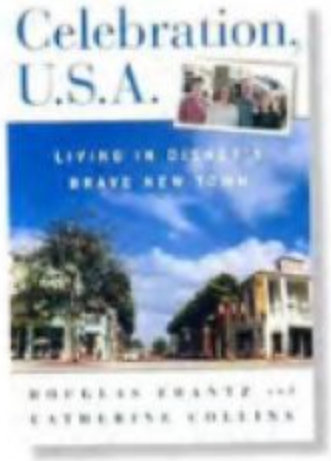
BY MARK WILLIAMS

Celebration, U.S.A.
Living in Disney's Brave New Town
By Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins
342 pages, $25
Henry Holt

E-topia
"Urban Life, Jim—But Not As We Know It"
By William J. Mitchell
184 pages, $23
MIT Press

AFTER HEMINGWAY, John Cheever (1912–1982) was—for my money—the 20th century's greatest American short-story writer. But Cheever's territory was quite unlike Hemingway's. In the Eisenhower and Kennedy years, he was the laureate of the WASP suburbs and the three-martini lunch: the America built when the Federal Housing Act and the G.I. Bill financed a continentwide construction of homes for veterans returning from World War II and Korea.

One '50s Cheever story, "A Miscellany of Characters That Will Not Appear," is simply a smart-aleck list of things that he claimed had become mediocre writers' clichés and that he was banishing from *his* books—things like depictions of alcoholics and homosexuals, and "all parts for Marlon Brando." Also, Cheever wrote, his readers should reject "all scornful descriptions of American landscapes with ruined tenements, automobile dumps, polluted rivers, jerry-built ranch houses, abandoned miniature golf links, cinder deserts, ugly hoardings, unsightly oil derricks...gaudy and fanciful gas stations, unclean motels, candlelit tearooms, and streams paved with beer cans, for these are not, as they might seem to be, the ruins of our civilization, but the temporary encampments and outposts of the civilization that we—you and I—shall build."

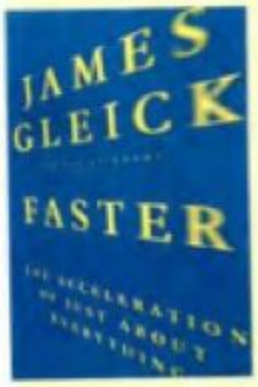


The preceding is to make a couple of points. First, although two books about Celebration, Florida, the town that Disney planned, have just been published amid a lot of media noise (one—*Celebration, U.S.A.*, by the husband-and-wife team of Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins—suffices for our purposes here), it is not some singularity. From the Pilgrims through 19th-century ventures like the Oneida Community in central New York and Frederick Law Olmsted's Riverside near Chicago, to the postwar Levittowns and present-day municipalities like Seaside, Florida, America has been engaged in an ongoing construction experiment. Indeed, the post-World

SUMMER READS

Time-out guide

Those of us in technology-related industries probably don't need to be told that our lives are moving at a very high velocity. Yet finding the time to read **Faster:** *The Acceleration of Just About Everything* (Pantheon Books, $24), the latest work from James Gleick, is well worth the trouble. Acknowledging that most of his potential audience has little time to read, Mr. Gleick's book is written in an easy-to-absorb style with very short chapters.



The Pulitzer Prize–winning author of 1987's *Chaos: Making a New Science* and 1992's *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman*, Mr. Gleick is an able documentarian of the many manifestations of the late-20th-century obsession with time. He depicts numerous instances of the absurd ways in which we try to save time, by shaving a few seconds here and there off everyday tasks, or "multitasking"—driving, talking on a cell phone, listening to the radio, and eating breakfast all at once.

Faster's strongest point is incontestable: that our fixation on getting more out of our days is paradoxically making us feel like we are getting less and less out of them. By constantly trying to find more time to do more things, we are internalizing this acceleration and becoming trapped in a vicious circle. Mr. Gleick touches only lightly on the cultural underpinnings of how we understand and experience time; he is far better at describing the symptoms than the causes of the "hurry sickness." Faster is an excellent snapshot of the mania gripping our culture, but if you're looking for a way to get 25 hours out of every day, look elsewhere.

—Peter Rojas

SHELF LIFE

Tale of two media

Digital Babylon: *How the Geeks, the Suits, and the Ponytails Tried to Bring Hollywood to the Internet* (Arcade Publishing, $26), by John Geirland and Eva Sonesh-Kedar, accurately describes the disappointments of the first digital entertainment players as they tried to deliver original programming over the Internet. It's an enjoyable read—if you can ignore the excessive references to geeks (programmers), suits (financiers), and ponytails (creative types).

The ponytails are the obvious heroes. Scott Zakarin, who received a lot of media attention for cocreating The Spot, the first "Webisodic," is *Digital Babylon*'s protagonist: one of the "artists who saw the Internet as a powerful tool for creating new entertainment experiences." Yet he was constantly struggling to find investors to back the $50,000-per-month site. The suits are portrayed as greedy for demanding revenues and a broader audience, and the geeks "lacked marketing instincts." Later, the authors root for Mr. Zakarin's joint endeavor with Brandon Tartikoff (a ponytail at heart, but a suit because of his TV success) at America Online's Greenhouse Studios in 1997.

Nevertheless, AOL's Entertainment Asylum was shut down in 1998 because of viewer apathy and budget cuts. *Digital Babylon* attributes these and other early failures to culture clashes rather than to the newness of the medium and a lack of viable business plans. Hollywood at the dawn of the Web was very much like high school in the '80s, when it was coolest to be a ponytail, OK to be a suit, and unbearable to be a geek.

—Jennifer Lewis

War II subdivisions of tract homes begetting further subdivisions and strip malls are even a historical achievement. In hindsight, we condemn their results. Yet within a span of only a few years, much of this giant nation was improvised into existence in places where there had previously been vast stretches of vacant lands. And if all of those who fled the cities didn't do so because suburbia represented something nearer a democratic utopia, they were certainly convinced they'd live better lives there.

Second, Disney's Celebration is a reaction against the suburbs' mass-produced developments and fender-to-fender commuters. In *Celebration, U.S.A.*, Mr. Frantz and Ms. Collins describe U.S. Highway 192 as "perhaps the ugliest and most garish stretch of blacktop in America. Less than ten miles from Walt Disney World...clogged every day of the year with tourists in rented minivans...multiple outlets of every fast-food chain known to mankind, countless T-shirt shops and tattoo parlors, an American Gladiators dinner theater, endless cheap motels"—and so on, in a litany essentially unchanged from Cheever's '50s list of eyesores.

What, finally, hath the Eisner-era Mouse wrought? Not the Jetsons-style technoville within a giant, climate-controlled bubble that Walt originally envisioned.

During the '60s, precisely because cheap motels had proliferated at Disneyland's gates, Walt and Roy bought 30,000 acres of land to gain some distance when they created Disney World. Florida politicians granted the company near-sovereignty, with powers including permission to raise taxes within its own district and to issue tax-free municipal bonds based on the premise that Walt's Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, or EPCOT, would have real inhabitants when it was built. But what, finally, hath the Eisner-era Mouse wrought? Not the Jetsons-style technoville within a giant, climate-controlled bubble that Walt originally envisioned.

PORCH SONGS

No, Celebration is a specimen of New Urbanism, the neotraditional movement dedicated to the revivification of communities by setting homes closer together and within walking distance of town centers. Celebration's houses come in Victorian, Classical, Colonial, and other styles based on prototypes in places like Savannah, Georgia, and East Hampton, New York. Garages and driveways are at the rear of the houses, accessed through alleys. Front porches set near sidewalks are meant to foster a sense of community. Mr. Frantz and Ms. Collins report that enough of it developed among the town's residents to burn some folks out; the porches tended to go unused. Also, the construction companies that Disney hired had difficulties with deadlines and the use of cheap labor; some astonishing shoddiness occurred in building the new homes, which cost a third more than the market average. A futuristic campus, the Disney Institute, was initially proposed, as well as a fiber-optic network through which residents could receive movies without visiting a video store; both projects were shelved. The town's school had been one of Disney's biggest selling points, but a central theme of *Celebration, U.S.A.* is that many parents rebelled against the experimental educational programs that the company had installed, in favor of back-to-basics graded methods.

Mr. Frantz and Ms. Collins's verdict? Whether despite or because of Disney, a real community emerged during the year they and their children lived in

Celebration. Simple things like "running into neighbors when you duck beneath a portico downtown to escape a sudden rainstorm" contributed. Overall, returning to their old house in a cloistered Connecticut suburb was unattractive—especially, Mr. Frantz thought, the prospect of commuting to work two hours every day: "a preposterous waste of time after the efficiency of working at home." The average suburban household puts 30,000 miles on its vehicles annually; the authors had driven their car less than 1,000 miles each month in Celebration.

"At various points in American history, the country has struggled to reinvent itself," they write. "It may be we are at such a juncture now. Dissatisfaction with cities and suburbs is evident." Still, despite the planned mixed-income housing and public buildings designed by first-rank architects, Celebration itself was homogeneously whitebread and lacked intellectual culture: Ms. Collins and Mr. Frantz planned to move again after another year, though they felt they would like to live in a town "a lot like Celebration."

SIM CITIES

In *E-topia: "Urban Life, Jim—But Not As We Know It,"* William J. Mitchell writes that we may soon become used to asking, "Is this building really necessary? Can we wholly or partially substitute electronic systems instead?" Almost everyone accepts that an all-encompassing computing infrastructure will emerge. Mr. Mitchell, dean of MIT's School of Architecture and Planning, sketches the ways this could reform our habitats.

Indeed, *E-topia* suggests that we should even get ready for smart Sheetrock. Intelligent buildings with wall-size screens—part of "a world of things that don't just *sit* there, but *consider* what they are supposed to be doing and choose their actions accordingly"—may provide peripheral or immersive digital environments as required. Embedded systems will use energy resources far more efficiently. The trend toward instantaneous, high-quality connections creating interdependencies among different global zones will continue. Simultaneously, the proliferation of live-work dwellings will generate new architectural patterns, perhaps resembling such past models as those European artisans' shops behind or above which their families lived—and these will be clustered in neighborhoods that are walkable and rich in local community life, as in Celebration.

Mr. Mitchell proposes few technological developments that, taken individually, are surprising. But cumulatively his short book is a level-headed argument that we possess every opportunity to discard our current unsustainable patterns and "create e-topias: lean, green cities that work smarter, not harder." So take a look at *E-topia*. It presents a viable, attractive vision of the civilization that we—you and I—might build.

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