

# Living with a Marsupial Mouse

## Lessons from Celebration, Florida

Jeremy Shearmur

A small town in Florida, developed by the Disney Corporation, demonstrates how a private voluntary community can work—without the need for gates.

Critics of capitalism often associate large-scale private property development with dull and ugly uniformity. Unattractive strip developments, such as those found near tourist resorts in the United States, are, they claim, what the future will look like under capitalism—unless key decisions are made politically rather than privately.<sup>1</sup> Arguments can be made for the advantages of uniformity and branding in a country in which people are highly mobile. The last thing one wants after a long journey is to check into a hotel with lower-than-expected standards and to eat meals of dubious quality in a local diner. It has to be said, however, that strip developments of the kind found on major highways near Disney World, on the outskirts of Orlando, Florida, are the stuff of nightmares for aesthetic critics of capitalism.

Yet an alternative to this prospect—and an impeccably capitalist one, as it is the creation of the Disney Corporation—can be found in the same area as the much maligned strip developments. For, in addition to being the home of part of Disney World and numerous other theme parks, Osceola County in Florida is also where Celebration is located.

Celebration, Florida, was privately developed by The Celebration Company (part of Disney Corporation), as an actual town—or perhaps, better, a very large suburban subdivision with some features of a town—in which people live. It represents a particular style of life that some people will find attractive, and offers, for example, a practical resolution of Robert Putnam's worries about a fall-off in civic participation and voluntary activity.<sup>2</sup> Others may hate the very idea of

such a life, but what is striking about Celebration is that it provides a practical model that could be adapted to a range of different preferences.

On the basis of a review of the literature about it and a recent visit, I will argue that not only does Celebration work, but also that it could serve as a useful model for development in Australia. It is of philosophical interest as well, because it connects with some frequently overlooked strands of thought in classical liberalism. It not only indicates that it is possible for entrepreneurs to offer integrated solutions to the problems of how people might choose to live, but also demonstrates that it is possible to accomplish better—privately—some things which it is often thought that only government can do.

### Celebration, Florida

In 1994, the Disney Corporation founded Celebration, Florida: what is, in effect, a private town—albeit one in which members of the general public purchase or rent dwellings, rather than company employees—and which currently has over 5,000 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> Although Walt Disney's own ideas about the Epcot Center at Disney World included a city of the future, these were

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along very different lines to what eventually became Celebration.

Disney World was made possible when the Florida legislature created the Reedy Creek Improvement District<sup>4</sup> across two Florida counties, giving Disney (hereafter to mean the corporation) the ability to develop its theme parks with very few restrictions. Its responsibilities were similar to—and in some cases went beyond—those of local counties. It did not pay taxes to the counties, and was responsible for the provision of all the relevant services. The arrangement was made in such a way that—as distinct from Disney's theme park in California—it did not have other kinds of development immediately surrounding it (although there is Disney-dependent development, by way of hotels, souvenir shops, restaurants, and so forth, on the roads leading to it).

At one point, a major road cut off an area of swampy land from the main Disney area, and this land became the basis of Celebration. Disney came to an arrangement with the local county that they would give this land back to their jurisdiction (so that people living there would pay local taxes; it also meant that they would not have a political say in the development of the Reedy Creek Improvement District), in return for the facilitation of development. The development, however, was distinctive: it was what became Celebration.

Celebration is a planned town.<sup>5</sup> Its design was influenced by the ideas of the New Urbanism in architecture, but, more specifically, by an exercise comparable to that suggested by Jane Jacobs,<sup>6</sup> in which people see what actually works and learn from it. In this case, people visited a range of towns in the US known for being attractive to live in, and drew lessons from them.

Houses can be selected from a limited number of designs. Lot sizes for properties in the current price range—US \$175,000 to a million plus—are small, and properties are situated at the front of the lots, close to one another and to the road, to facilitate interaction between people. There is a lot of well-maintained public space (although given the location of Celebration, and the character of this space, it is not likely to be used by anyone but residents and the occasional tourist). Many of the houses face onto, or have a view of, lakes. Some of the original marshy land, covered in trees and shrubs, has been retained, with attractive wooden walkways built through it. There is an abundance of wildlife, from alligators, which I did not see but which are in evidence from warning notices (protecting them from you, rather than vice versa) to a wide range of birds. There is

also a corridor between the town and the main road, which runs through a mixture of woodland and Celebration's golf course.

The centre of the town is situated on the side of a large artificial lake. It features a hotel as well as a range of restaurants and shops. These include real estate offices, a delicatessen and grocery, and a number of somewhat pricey boutique-style shops selling clothes, gifts, and so on. These are all within close walking distance from the most central residential parts of the town (where there are apartments over the central shops). There is also a cinema, a town hall and a post office—all architect-designed—and a school, next to which is a building that is now being used largely for university extension purposes by Stetson University.

What is unusual is that Disney were able to put all the infrastructure in place before the population of the town was significant;<sup>7</sup> because of interest in Celebration, the town draws tourists whose custom supports many more stores than could the population of the town on its own. Residents have to go elsewhere for much of their ordinary shopping—there is no supermarket, drugstore, hardware store, florist or, I understand, hair salon. Some of these needs may be met locally, and within the wider boundaries of Celebration, when development takes place in an as yet undeveloped lot by the large highway.<sup>8</sup> There are also office blocks, smaller ones within the main town area and larger ones, as well as a hospital and fitness centre within the bounds of Celebration, but beyond immediate walking distance from the town centre.

I found the town very attractive. The houses, and the way in which they had been developed, were similar to some of the more expensive residential subdivisions in Fairfax County, Virginia. The settings, notably the lakes, were pleasant, as were the range of restaurants, and areas to walk or jog. Even some things which might have seemed tacky—for example, the whole area was surrounded by a plastic white picket fence—looked good, and were also practical, given the climate. While housing is expensive to purchase, it is not much above the price of other housing in the area.<sup>9</sup> And Celebration puts together (and mixes up) property in a range of prices, and also includes rental property, while much ordinary suburban development in the US is segregated, quite strictly, by price. To discuss Celebration in terms of the real estate, however, is to miss some of its key aspects.

First, there is a system of rules that applies to residents. Those buying property in Celebration do so

subject to a range of rules that are concerned to keep the town attractive. They range from a requirement that window fittings should not display any colour but white to the outside, to, for example, the fact that recreational vehicles cannot be kept anywhere in Celebration.<sup>10</sup> Such regulations sometimes bemuse people who are not used to them, but they are a relatively common feature in many American suburbs. I used to live in Northern Virginia, in a modest development of town houses in a woodland setting. The developer, when he set up the property, placed ownership of the roads and common land into the hands of a company which, on completion of the building, was transferred to the homeowners. It had a complex body of rules concerning the care and upkeep of properties, and regulations governing such matters as when rubbish could be placed on the roadside for collection, and the number and type of pets that were allowed. They were imposed to keep the place looking pleasant and, ultimately, to preserve property values.

It has been estimated that in 1992 some 17% of Americans lived in communities with such regulations,<sup>11</sup> so the broad character of the rules at Celebration is not that unusual. Indeed, those governing Celebration are less stringent than ones found in some suburban subdivisions in the area.<sup>12</sup> What is different about Celebration is that the rules are policed by professionals rather than over-vigilant, and sometimes arbitrary, neighbours. Further in my case, the rules could be changed by a simple majority of those who turned up at a meeting of the association, provided that due notice had been given of the meeting. At Celebration, the developer can veto changes for as long as it holds property in the area—which it is likely through its ownership of commercial property in the downtown area.

At present, Celebration is an unincorporated area within Osceola County in Florida, so some basic services—the school, police and fire brigade—are provided by the County. Once the town is ‘built out’ it could decide to become a town in its own right and take over these responsibilities for itself.

The issue of the school indicates one area in which Celebration was not initially successful. Disney wanted Celebration’s school to be a model school within the regular state system (and that the school should take children from a wider area

than just Celebration). It cooperated with several universities to work out what was thought to be a desirable (progressive) system of education. But it hit three problems. First, Disney wanted to make the school special; but the county educational authority did not want to accord it special treatment. As a result, special funding from Disney was spread across the whole County. Second, the system of progressive education appeared to require high-calibre teachers, and more of them than the County could afford. Given that local rates of pay for teachers are low, it was difficult to retain good staff. Third, many of the parents were unhappy about the kind of education that was being offered—for example, progress reports instead of grades. It is not clear that its kind of progressive education fitted the values that attracted people to Celebration in the first place.<sup>13</sup>

What were these values? They might be seen as a combination of the social character of a small town in which one knew one’s neighbours and where there a great deal of communal activity, together with the advantages of a ‘wired’ community. A subtext might be an appeal of ‘safety’.<sup>14</sup> These have been delivered pretty well.

Disney set up The Celebration Foundation to encourage volunteering for charitable causes and various forms of social interaction. When I visited the town, they were advertising on the town’s intranet for volunteers to host a ‘Lights and Lemonade’ evening in different locations. Those who wished to meet their neighbours would drop into a designated house that the hosts had opened up for the evening. Events of a more general character, such as a ‘Beach and Seafood Festival’ were also arranged on a regular basis (I am not sure by whom) for the benefit both of townspeople

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and to bring tourists to the stores. There were also many other activities, advertised on a dedicated channel of the local cable station, and also through the intranet, for which all homes were wired. (There are also two newspapers that come out every month, one, *Celebration News* 'the official newsletter of Celebration Town Hall'; the other, *Independent Celebration*).

These activities seemed to me the heart of the town: if people wish to live in a community where residents know one another, then one could hardly do better than to live in a town in which the houses were designed for such interaction, with a Foundation to encourage such activity. Those who do not like such things can choose to live elsewhere (as, indeed, an assistant in one of the stores with whom I discussed Celebration, was happy to do). Celebration also seems to have been successful in relation to crime, although it recently suffered the second home invasion since the town was set up.<sup>15</sup>

But the real significance of Celebration lies in the manner in which it was set up, and the way it has functioned to fit with the values and tastes of those who have chosen to live there. Not only is it physically attractive—and the provision of well-maintained public space as opposed to extensive private space is one of its best features—but the kinds of activity and interaction that it promotes are immensely attractive to some people (although unattractive to others). It is not cheap—although one can rent a studio apartment for US \$600 per month<sup>16</sup>—but the cost is offset by the provision of a high level of public and semi-public services. (The intranet, town activities, and one of the parks are closed other than to residents and their guests; the rest of the town is open to anyone who wishes to visit and—as I have mentioned—the stores and restaurants clearly need external custom to survive.) Celebration shows how an open community, but one dedicated to certain values, can work successfully, and demonstrates that such initiatives can be done privately, without gates.

### Lessons for Australia

What about Australia? Having seen Celebration, it would be interesting if, say, the next Canberra suburb could be developed along the same lines. But for this to be possible, we would need to change our attitudes and our laws.

First, changes would need to be made to allow planning decisions to be taken out of the hands of elected bodies, for purposes *internal* to such developments (that is, one

would not allow for the generation of externalities from such developments, other than what would occur in respect of more usual development of the land, whether in respect of sewage or volume of traffic etc, unless appropriate payments were made).

Second, general attitudes would have to change. For a Federal polity, Australia seems oddly frightened of diversity. We also have—for example in New South Wales—absurd requirements that the same level of service should be provided in different parts of the State. We should recognise that people may have different ideals, and want to live different kinds of lives, and allow them to do so. Celebration represents an alternative to the usual pattern of democratic accountability; namely, one that people buy into, as consumers, with an agreed pattern of doing things.<sup>17</sup> Although it may not be to the taste of many Australians, such private initiatives could evolve to reflect ways of living that appeal to Australians, not Americans.

### Concluding remarks

Celebration indicates how diversity and experiments in living, as well as competition between different kinds of local authority, might be realised in a practical manner. It should be of interest to those familiar with the 'utopia' section of Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, or the 'evolutionary' themes in Hayek's work.<sup>18</sup> It suggests how Jane Jacobs' ideas about learning from what works might be put to practical use.<sup>19</sup> Celebration should also be of interest to economists, because of its relevance to the literature on club goods, and to Tiebout's ideas about competition between forms of local government.<sup>20</sup>

Celebration raises some interesting philosophical problems; for example, the extent to which such communities can make their own rules without compromising or undermining the underlying liberalism of the setting within which they are operating. But on the face of it, no major theoretical problems would arise from developments like Celebration, because they would not function as total communities: people would typically shop, and usually work, outside them, and there is also free entry of ideas by way of television, radio and the postal service, and a wish, on the part of the people there, to educate their children so that they have opportunities for tertiary education and for wider careers. Clearly, problems may arise if people favour more restrictive communities. But Celebration offers a model of private development that avoids these most interesting issues. ■