July 30, 2023

Fantasy Meets Reality

One of my favorite things to notice as a weirdo is when the good intentions of design slam into the hard reality of humans and the real world. It's always interesting.

Let's start with an Asgardian example, a theme park design story told in three photos. *(Pics via DLPReport)*

① A nice scenic thing is installed.

② It's suddenly gone (and cloaked with trash cans)

Canettes et bouteilles en plastique uniquement
Cans and plastic bottles only

③ It's back! But: *something new has been added!*

You can probably guess what happened, right?

This element was designed *just* low enough to look like an (extremely uncomfortable?) seat to a tired guest.

(via [@dlp_guests_show](#))

When it comes to design in the real world, there are a few basic rules that seem to *always* apply:

If it looks neat, people will want to take a photo with it. If it looks comfortable, people will want to sit on it. If it looks fun, people will play around on it. Etc.

And yet, designers are often still caught by surprise! Ex-Imagineer Jim Shull recalled at least two times when this phenomenon got him:

Another view of the Jeep. My operating assumption was that guests standing the queue wouldn't step out to pose with the Jeep. I was wrong. Once many guests posed on the Jeep covering it with human bodies. [#Disneylandparis](#) [pic.twitter.com/noaetZzgTA](#)

— Jim Shull (@JimShull) [July 24, 2023](#)

When Toy Story Play Land opened this toy R C Racer was available for guests to pose around. Unfortunately guests would sit on the fin and hang from the antenna and so the prop was moved to the tram tour route. A second prop was built for Toy Story Land at Hong Kong Disneyland. [pic.twitter.com/M16F1paliK](#)

— Jim Shull (@JimShull) [July 24, 2023](#)

Here's another recent example:

① Design a beautiful sloped base for your Quinjet.

② Soon, rope it off.

③ Also, add a sign. (Google "Avengers Font" first)

④ Then, *something new has been added!*

How does this keep happening?

Surely, you're thinking, we know how humans act by now, so we can easily adjust as necessary in our designs?

But it's a big, different planet with lots of different people in it, who grew up in lots of different ways. At Tokyo Disneyland, for example, you can create elaborate in-reach prop displays that will never, *ever* be disturbed or broken by guests — rules are rules. (By the same token, I once got politely yelled at there for ducking under a chain to shortcut a completely, 100% empty line. I absolutely *had* to walk through the entire, empty switchback. And that's fair, I *was* breaking the rules!) Whereas here in America, if your prop is not literally bolted down, it's likely to show up on eBay / Van Eaton within the week.

Tokyo Disneyland also has beautiful integrated water features that were *totally* incomprehensible to my American litigious-society self. Wait, there's no railing here? How is this even possible?! I never would have imagined this was something you could do in a theme park.

Design is global. No one person can have all the world's understanding. And that can lead to blind spots. I think there's a good argument to be made that a more diverse team of empowered designers working together could catch a lot more potential real-world design pitfalls.

But honestly, a lot of it, I think, is just that some designers are amazing at *imagining* things, but not as amazing at imagining them *surrounded by the universe*. That beautiful thing you're working on, it lives in a window on your monitor tucked under a title bar, and that's as tricky as it gets. What if you *can't* imagine your thing in its final context? What if you *aren't great* at predicting human behaviors other than your own? What if you push a worst-case scenario out of your mind because you like your idea so much that it's "at least worth trying"? (I've done this!) Maybe you've forgotten how you would goof around with your friends to make them laugh way back when. Or maybe, a little bit sadly, you've forgotten what it's like to experience the world as a kid. Not everyone will, or can, have these skills.

It almost seems like there's a real job here for the right type of person. "Real World Engineer"? Unfortunately, the closest thing most companies currently have is "lawyer".

Hey, what about the guests?

When theme park nerds discuss things like this, it's usually eye-rolled as **"this is why we can't have nice things!"**, and I 100% get that. Yes, it *would* be *very* awesome if all of humanity had an innate sense of what would break and what wouldn't, and didn't put themselves in danger, and were more respectful to nice things, just in general.

But, between you and me, I can't *totally* blame humans.

I think this flipped for me a little at Disneyland Paris,
where we watched an incredible dance play out every day:

- People would hop the fence and relax on the nice grass.
- A cast member would bark and shoo everybody off.
- Three minutes later people were back. Repeat infinitely.

My first reaction was, naturally, "Geez! Why can't these
people just follow the rules?!" But the more I thought about
it, *the nicer that dang grass started to look*.

We'd been walking all day. We're exhausted. Benches are hard
to find. It's hot and humid. And what could be nicer than a
Disneyland nap… the ambient noise… the smells…

Suddenly — for a brief moment — I got it.

Of course I'm going to sit on this beautiful grass lawn because it's hot and I'm exhausted and it looks relaxing!

Of course I'm going to try to take a photo in this cool looking toy jeep because that's a really unique memory and heck we're waiting for this dang line to move anyway!

Of course I'm going to run up this curved wall and see if I can touch the ceiling because I'm waiting for my dumb sister and it looks like the one from Ninja Warrior!

And of course I'm going to try to sit on this ancient, weird stone and/or metal pedestal from Asgard, because I'm tired as hell, and the design is very successful in convincing me that it's an incredibly solid place to sit, so I don't realize it's actually hollow and made of fiberglass and will crack immediately under my weight!!

Give me more places to relax! Give me more cool things to take photos with! Give me playgrounds! This was expensive and might be my only time here in my life! Rarrrrrrr

Ok, ok, deep breath.

I eventually snapped back to being the good rule-following productive member of our capitalist society that I am on a (mostly) daily basis.

But it still stuck with me: **good design isn't just beautiful and incredible and boundary-pushing, it also remembers what it means to be human.**

PS: sometimes they catch it!

When Disney's California Adventure first opened, it had these gigantic CALIFORNIA letters out front, to frame the entrance as if a kind of a life-sized picture postcard.

(via ©Disney)

As a low-key typeface goof, and an overall [Futura Condensed](#) fan, I couldn't help but notice one thing…

Do you see it?

(via [Yesterland](#))

Yes, the bar on the "F" was raised just a *little* bit higher. The white outline is the actual Futura.

I'd bet you $99 this was done for just ~~one~~ two reasons: to prevent people from climbing up and sitting on the F. (And so people don't hit their heads, of course. Thx John.)

One point to the designers!

Best,
Cabel

PPS: if you have any 'well, that didn't quite go as we planned' stories, please share them so we can all learn!

Leave a Reply

Total *July 30, 2023*

I'd push in a slightly different direction — make things are *supposed* to be sat on, climbed on, touched. Honor the desires of the people and you'll be giving them an even better time than putting ropes up around stuff. The example I think of is "desire paths" where designers will wait to see the route people actually take across a landscape and then put the path there, rather than try to force people to adhere to a particular route.

Reply

cabel *July 30, 2023*

I totally agree and mention this in the middle somewhere! 🙂

Reply

Dan *July 31, 2023*

I actually rather like their solution to people running up the warped all under the Quinjet for this exact reason… turning it from "a place that people try to climb" into "a place that people are invited to sit" (in the shade, no less!) is actually a really smart adaptation.

Reply

Stephen Sasser   *July 30, 2023*

I blame it on the one guy who breaks the rule first. Everyone else is doing it because others are doing it. Park your car in a "no parking zone" and soon there will be many, "It must be OK."

Reply

cabel   *July 30, 2023*

Yeah for sure, dad, there is always that first scofflaw. (I still think they could build in less reasons to be a scofflaw!) Thanks for reading my post!

Reply

Brian Enigma   *July 30, 2023*

I'd also say the same goes for folks _following_ the law. If a bicyclist or pedestrian wants to cross a busy street, quite a lot of cars will mindlessly zoom by… until just one slows to a stop, and suddenly everyone else falls into line. (I say this from the point of view as both the bicyclist and the first driver to stop when I see a fellow bicyclist.)

Reply

Dave Rutledge   *July 30, 2023*

I'd love a collection of "concept art" style illustrations but with a goal of showing worst case scenario of how guests will interact with the rides, buildings, and decor shown

Reply

John I. Clark *July 30, 2023*

That F was also adjusted so that people wouldn't bang their heads on it!! 🤣

Reply

cabel *July 30, 2023*

Oh… oh that's also true. 😆 Two-for-one

Reply

Alicia *August 2, 2023*

And so it wouldn't block the background, in pictures!

You remind me of the book: The Psychology of Everyday Things.

Reply

charlie *August 11, 2023*

An excellent book – and relevant, as the book itself is an example of adjusting a design for the real world. Donald Norman says he changed the title in later editions to The Design Of Everyday Things so as to "make the title less cute and more descriptive". An article I read years ago said that one of the reasons for the change was that the original title sometimes got the book mis-shelved in

the Psychology section of bookstores, rather than with the Design books.

Brian Ashe *August 13, 2023*

> An article I read years ago said that
> one of the reasons for the change was…
It's in the intro to the edition that was named Design of Everyday Things.

John I. Clark *July 30, 2023*

[P.S. You just might owe me $99! 🤓]

Reply

cabel *July 30, 2023*

Oh, I forgot to add a note that the re-done ToonTown in Disneyland has an artificial turf picnic area where you can relax! With shade! This is a great thing.

Of course, the merch masters they are, they'll happily sell you a picnic set and blanket… 😉

Reply

Claire Hummel *July 30, 2023*

One of my favorite fantasy-vs-reality moments at Disneyland was when I went to Galaxy's Edge about a week after it opened, when all the bathroom were still called "refreshers" (and labeled as such). I asked a cast member where the nearest restroom was, they wearily said "ahhh you're coming from off-world, you must mean a refresher," and pointed me down an alley, and I thought MAN, that must be a pain to correct every guest and to literally not have any signs that say restrooms!! What a weird choice!!!

LO AND BEHOLD the next time I went to Galaxy's Edge: bathroom signs.

Reply

dusoft *July 30, 2023*

Thanks for sharing these stories and examples!

Function before design and design that respects function. As mentioned above, desire paths are good example. Also designers should really think about "worst" things that could happen (somebody might sit on it!) and design accordingly (add benches under…).

Reply

Julian *July 30, 2023*

My ideal is that things/systems/places are built under the assumption that they will get something wrong. If not at the

beginning, then eventually, when time passes and context changes.

Make a process that can react, respond, and change. Remove the pressure from having to get it 100% correct at the beginning and instead focus on adapting swiftly and gracefully. Use that same system to keep everything fresh as the world around it changes too.
Reply

Mike *July 30, 2023*

My favorite story like this is when most of my cousins and I went to Disneyland one year, for some reason we were waiting between the restrooms & gift shop across from Soarin' & the youngest kids turned it into a water play area because there was a drinking fountain

Reply

David *July 30, 2023*

The "California" letters are now at the California Expo & State Fair in Sacramento. Disney donated them, I guess when they redesigned that part of the park. Incidentally, today is the last day of the state fair this year.

Reply

Jan Martinek *July 30, 2023*

I read this through a lens of accessibility of public spaces — for a few years I worked with a municipal board that gathers people across the various offices (transportation, greenery, accommodation, various ngos etc.) and now I'll be forever blinded by the amount of what's wrong not only with pieces built as art or for display, but with the "primary citizens" of

the public space: buildings, roads, pavements, etc. Not only due to the carelessness (or intentional disregard) of the people who manage the spaces but also their users — especially when they have a "thing" to use there: from cars to café's outside seating to shared scooters…

It feels like a very similar problem (a thing vs the universe) but on a different scale — and it's really hard to systematically make it better, despite its effect on everybody who's using the space.

Reply

Robert Currie *July 30, 2023*

The new municipal library in the city where I live (an amazing and popular building) included some 3-d signage that extended out from the wall, like a small shelf — a nice detail. Also, perfect for a 5-year-old grasp and hang from, leading to the signs quickly being broken off from the wall.

I've personally spent a fair bit of time figuring out what type sizes need to be be avoided when designing water-jet cut metal signage to keep, say, a cut-out 'k" from turning into a trap for the fingers of the curious.

Designing signage and exhibits means climb-ability, and other creative misuses, have to be taken into consideration (although you're always going to be out-smarted by users.)

Reply

Aadi *July 30, 2023*

What an enjoyable writeup!

My name starts with an A, so if I saw an huge A, I would definitely sit in it for the time it takes to take a picture!

Rudi *July 31, 2023*

That's why I love the Oslo opera house so much—it's explicitly built to be walked on. The outside and roof are always full of happy tourists and locals just hanging out!

https://www.snohetta.com/projects/norwegian-national-opera-and-ballet

Mark Whybird *August 10, 2023*

Fantastic! See also the grass roof of Parliament House, Australia:
https://www.reddit.com/r/mildlyinteresting/comments/a8fkop/australias_parliament_house_has_a_grass_roof_top/
This was explicitly designed to symbolize that government is always under the people.

(Sadly, in 2017 they put a fence about 3/4 of the way up for security reasons. Boo, hiss.)

Matt *July 31, 2023*

The grass example Disney in Paris seems like the biggest miss………..French culture loves to picnic/lounge on a lawn so how did the designer(s) miss this as a possibility?!?!?!?

Morgan *July 31, 2023*

In Halifax they built a large, eminently climbable wave sculpture on the waterfront, and then spent the next 25 years shoo-ing kids off of it. About 10 years ago they caved, but instead of a fence they put down a perimeter of that rubberized playground surfacing and encouraged the kids to go at it.

https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/halifaxs-new-wave-to-ease-three-decade-long-climbing-conflict

Reply

Heather *August 1, 2023*

This is a great example! I'm from Halifax and all that's left of the wave's climb-denying days is a small plaque that says, Please do not climb. Poor, sad, ignored little plaque.

Reply

Chris Koerner *July 31, 2023*

What is that first Asgardian thing even suppose to be? Hammer storage?

Reply

Hart Liss *August 1, 2023*

One of the old lessons from the Apple/Microsoft "war" is that there's a market for devices and software that are well designed. That is, when a period of relatively deep thought before something's designed, maybe too at time of deciding on the design.
And we also learned from that is that that level of thought is the exception. The rule is to design something that looks good but was designed with no more thought than that.

Which is to say the thesis in the post comes as no surprise. Rather, it illustrates the rule.

Reply

Kenn Boroughs *August 1, 2023*

Neat article. I was impressed by the out of the box thinking. BTW- on that last one, I thought the bottom of the "F" was a ride height requirement marker. 😉

Reply

Designer *August 1, 2023*

As a designer what is going on here is that designers are hired to be creative. They aren't hired to be engineers. Or to do someone else's job. Or to fix the overall problems of a space as a whole. Designers are told what is desired, and they design that thing. It's not a designer's job to know how many benches exist in a park, if enough benches are placed throughout the park, and if their creative art piece is in the right spot to either be enjoyed or sat on. That's someone else's job. The layout of a space is an engineering feat. Designers aren't engineers. A designer can't do everyone's job. Designers do what we're told. We create the art piece or the creative piece and it's someone else's job to ensure they've put enough benches, or thought about who will be using the space, traffic flow, etc. If a Designer starts asking "are there enough benches in this park?" They will be told that's not their concern. Just do your job and design the creative part. So designers make what they're hired to make. It's not their responsibility to assess the entire scope of the land. The parameters of the job are told to them. So if the project managers of a public use space haven't told a Designer "and by the way we don't have enough benches around the area of your installment" or "this will be used in an area people will be

waiting and will get bored and will most likely want to mess with your installment," they can't design for those things. Designers aren't paid enough to also do everyone else's jobs, nor is that what they're hired to do. Now, the difference is when someone works full time for a specific theme park. They should be consulting with other departments to figure these things out. However, you also point out design pieces outside theme parks, where most design work is hired out piece meal in places like public parks or building projects. And designers can only design on the parameters they've been given. It's up to the people over-seeing the entire project to work out things like traffic patterns and access. And the landscape designer hired to design a grassy knoll was no doubt just told to design a nice green space. It wasn't their job to determine anything else. When you're commissioned or hired for creative work, you just deliver what you're hired to create. It's up to the ones who hired you to assess the area correctly and tell you things like "and there are no benches around this art installment so don't make it low enough to sit on." If designers aren't made aware, they can't incorporate it. So you're talking about different jobs. In an ideal world, engineers and designers and project managers and contractors and maintenance and human behavior experts and everyone else would work together on projects, sitting down together at the same table to problem solve. But that's time consuming and very costly. I've never seen that happen. It's almost always easier and cheaper for the powers that be to add a bandaid fix after.

Reply

Joseph *August 1, 2023*

First rule in Engineering design class was that if you need a label to prevent the misuse or encourage the real use of something, It's Bad Design!

Steve *August 1, 2023*

Reminds me of the multiple wall art pieces made of colored fluffy moss-like stuff scattered throughout my office floor. Every one of them comes with a plaque saying DO NOT TOUCH as if it's the nameplate at a museum.

Barb Boswell *August 2, 2023*

My granddaughter graduated from Savannah College of Art & Design and is part of team designing a new theme park in Orlando Fl. She will be very interested in what you had to say. Thanks Cabel

Jonathan *August 2, 2023*

Fun post. This brought to mind Burning Man, where much of the art is designed to be interacted with…and often can't be fully appreciated *until* you engage with it. One wishes more public spaces were interactive and designed with engagement and play in mind.

Steven Swift *August 10, 2023*

Every day I walk down Montgomery St. in San Francisco, and I spend a little time noticing the buildings. Much of the architecture is wonderful. I think of the workmen who put time and energy and perhaps a bit of love into every single brick they laid. And the gargoyles and other design elements

up the side of the building. But the street is so narrow that you can't really appreciate that. You can't step back enough to get a full view of the building. Generally the furtherest back you can stand is literally across the street, maybe 50 feet away. I imagine these buildings sitting off by themselves in an open space. I bet that is how it looked in the original architect's drawings and models. But then it got placed in the middle of a crowd of buildings, obscuring much of its beauty. It seems the POV of the architect is often from out in space far from the building, whereas the actual POV most people will experience for many years after is from the ground a few meters from the base. There are notable exceptions, buildings designed to be experienced from the ground. The base of the Transamerica "Pyramid" is aesthetic to walk thru. But note that almost all pictures of it are either taken from a helicopter, or from a point half a mile way in the middle of Columbus ave.

Reply

mike *August 10, 2023*

is "Real World Engineer" another name for user researcher? i really enjoyed this but while reading the one thought i had over and over was "this is exactly what user research is for – put the thing in front of people, test your assumptions/designs (same thing), then change the thing when you find out how wrong you were".

Reply

Mike *August 11, 2023*

In landscape architecture we refer to the ways people *could* interact with the objects in their environments as

"affordances". And there are different affordances for different age groups, simply based on body size and sense of discovery. It's a neat science in and of itself!

Reply

Joe Cursio *August 11, 2023*

Your post reminds me of the work of Christopher Alexander: good architecture is designed *for* people. I think an example he used is a tire and rope attached to a tree branch. If kids actually use it as a swing, then it's good architecture. That's more important than a pristine lawn.

Reply

Dave *August 11, 2023*

It almost seems like there's a real job here for the right type of person. "Real World Engineer"? Or as we know them – UX Designers!

Reply

Adam Rice *August 11, 2023*

Building an art piece that's going to Burning Man is educational. If something looks like it might possibly be climbed on, it is a certainty that it will be, and if you don't design and build it to be climbed on (or interacted with in every other way), you are Doing It Wrong. It's also just a very harsh environment that will break things even without human interaction.

Reply

Jonathan Baldwin *August 11, 2023*

There's a sculpture outside Kings Cross Station in London that was designed so nobody could sit on it. They forgot to tell the people…

Reply

Raj *August 11, 2023*

Loved the piece. Now I want a Playdate (which I'd never heard about, to my shame), because I saw your product page and saw the lessons of this piece are writ large in the product's design. The child in me that stopped gaming around the time consoles became a real thing wants to connect again with those happy hours playing Tetris, but for this age.

"I think there's a good argument to be made that a more diverse team of empowered designers working together could catch a lot more potential real-world design pitfalls."

I think there is a mathematical case to be made for this. In the evolution of design, diversity of perspective in designers brings diversity of imagined real-world pit falls that you can optimize again, to minimize bad design outputs.
Of course, other factors play a role, but those factors being equal, I don't think a logical case can be made that a team of very similar designers is going to produce crap compared to a diverse team, so long as they both get along as a team.

Reply

Nate *August 21, 2023*

Should you ever find yourself in the Wisconsin Dells (no, I don't know why, either), a place that's handled this really impressively is Wizard Quest. It's basically a two-hour cross between a giant escape room and scavenger hunt. Over the years, puzzles and props have evolved as thousands of guests have,

well, acted like humans with them. In a town full of a lot of obnoxious tourist stuff, it's amazing. (Do not confuse it with the similarly-named and much worse "MagiQuest.")

It's also an example of a place where I would have expected the litigious nature of Americans to, shall we say, file more of the sharp edges off of things than has happened. Watch your feet, and I would not recommend it to someone with claustrophobia.

Would I visit Wisconsin from the west coast just to do this? Probably not, unless I cared about theme park design even more than I suspect that you do.

Would I take a day trip from an otherwise already-planned Chicago visit to do it? Maaaaybe. You could round it out with stops at House on the Rock and Dr. Evermor's Forevertron sculpture garden for a transcendently weird day.

[Reply](#)

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