



# THE STORY:

Connecting the Dots Between Themed Development  
and Senior Living

*By Scott Girard*

# Letter from the Author

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*Based upon my thirty-plus years of experience in and around Walt Disney Imagineering, as well as the body of my subsequent work which has taken me all over the globe, it seems to me that the line between design of public spaces in the commercial development industry and the entertainment industry has been fading since the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Illustrated and implemented so eloquently by my old boss, Walt Disney, theming of commercial projects has now evolved into a prevalent method of designing projects throughout the world. As a master storyteller, Walt's recipe for success in themed environments was grounded in his fervent belief that a visitor's entire experience must be rooted in "the story." The story gives the project a reason for its existence and meaning, and every aspect of the project must be filtered through, and thoroughly tied to "the story."*

*Fast forward to today and we witness the tidal wave of roughly 75 million baby boomers that are leading the country through a sweeping societal change. About 3 million baby boomers will hit retirement age every year for the next 20 years, and will affect market demands for senior living facilities, campuses, and communities not to mention healthcare and memory care for decades to come. In general, the boomers are bringing with them a passion for an active lifestyle, a demand for entertainment and dining options, engaging cultural activities, a profound sense of service, and desire to give back and contribute to their community. In addition to these lifestyle characteristics, we are seeing a demand in terms of the environment into which boomers retire. They desire a nature-rich environment that is secure and possesses components to which they can relate. A place that is in tune with their story...indeed, their life story.*

# Creating the experience

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## ...telling the story

Much like a themed resort or commercial center, senior living facilities as well as senior living campuses can orient themselves toward a specific lifestyle, unique cultural differences, or attempt to create a depiction of historical environments, all working to create unique attributes and experiences for the residents.

Boomers tend to define “aging well” as having good health and finances, but there is more to the equation. It means that people need to feel a handful of emotions on a regular basis, feelings not achieved through health or finance. Boomers have involved family situations as members of a sandwich generation and thus will not be living in isolation. They possess a deep emotional attachment to their homes and to their gardens, both of which embody so much of who they are and what they have worked for in their lives to this point. Thoughtful research based design can indeed enhance their lives through providing familiar elements that capture a memory or activity to which they can relate and actively engage.



Celebration, FL image by Scott Girard



Celebration, FL  
Image by Scott Girard

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The aesthetics of the building and grounds of a senior living facility needn't be institutional in nature. Indeed, senior living campuses are embracing architectural and environmental themes that offer distinctions from one property to another, while attracting potential residents with a strong identity or 'brand.' Often developed for a particular niche, a project's activity offerings can reinforce a specific



theme. Utilizing the natural terrain to influence a themed project can complement surroundings, while creating a sense of community or enhancing unique local or regional attributes. Theming also aids in maintaining continuity throughout the development, especially one created in phases.

We have a client whose family roots are in Italy. Their facilities and campuses embrace a Tuscan theme. As landscape architects we support that theme with landscape design features commonly found in the Tuscan region of Italy – a few rows of grape vineyard in the landscape, a variety of herbs used as landscape plants, lemon trees in large pots adorn stone patios that are defined by short hand-stacked stone walls.



Celebration, FL  
Image by Scott  
Girard

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Another client located in a Gulf Coast community in southwest Florida recently completed an addition to their large continuing care campus – a new cutting-edge memory care facility. While understanding and utilizing research-based design as a guiding principle, the development team which consisted of the owner, the entire design team, and contractor wrestled with how to define the ‘soul’ of the project. What would be the ‘heartbeat’ of this new facility? What would be the overarching theme? A member of the team mentioned the beautiful poem, *Sea of Life* by Carol Barton and what it meant to her and her family when they faced the difficult decisions that many must address when a loved one is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s Disease..

After reviewing the poem and much thoughtful consideration, the development team selected the poem and an accompanying image of a Coral Sea Fan as the emotional and visual anchor for the facility. A seaside theme was established and the poem was included in etched glass panels within the facility as well as on a fountain in the garden.



The coral sea fan image became a recognizable “branding image” on many items associated with interior ornamentation as well as marketing materials for the new facility.



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*What would be the heartbeat of this new facility? What would be the overarching theme?.*”



Prototype for glass etching and granite fountain design  
Credit Luc Century for all art

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Designing a themed project requires an intensive effort. Visions must be generated, cast, and maintained for a significant period of time; from the outset of the concept, through development and construction, and into the operational phases of the project. Everyone on the team including the owner, the development group, the creative team of planners, architects, landscape architects, interior designers, graphic professionals, sales & marketing personnel, and management staff must be committed to the vision and remain on-track for a themed project to become a resounding success. Projects of this nature require expertise and commitment at every level.

Institutional environments so often lack pleasing resident spatial experiences. As a result, themed environments designed to escape the mundane often emerge.

Theming can touch almost every senior living venue in some way or another and increasingly seems a necessity for differentiating senior living options in a competitive business environment. Themed developments offer mini-trips, either virtually “Traveling the world over,” or “Going back to a simpler life and time,” as is the case with the new urbanism movement in town planning which in many cases offers a pleasing blend of architectural and natural beauty, all enhanced by quiet corners and vibrant gathering spaces. And this trend is rapidly growing in the senior living industry – a trend that focuses on providing a nature-rich environment that is secure and possesses components to which a resident can relate. A place that is in tune with their life story.



# About the Author

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*A California native, Scott Girard was born and raised in Anaheim on a piece of ground that turned out to be 3 blocks from Disneyland. You've heard of "gym rats"? Scott became a "theme park rat" at the age of 9. On his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday he took a job at Disneyland driving the monorail, and over the following four years worked his way through college working on every attraction in the park. Studying landscape architecture, Scott found Disneyland to be the perfect place to learn his plant materials and how best to use them in a design.*

*Prior to graduation he was approached about joining the WED design team working on the "Florida Project" (Walt Disney World did not have an official name then). He accepted and spent the following 30 years designing and developing the landscapes for Disney projects worldwide. Walt Disney himself insisted that landscape architects be responsible for the design and coordination of areas outside of a building. Walt believed there should be only one conductor leading the symphony of multiple components i.e. lighting, paving color and texture, curbing, railing, fountains, landscaping, ponds and water features, etc. In addition to his Disney work, Scott has designed numerous projects for Marriott and Ritz-Carlton as well as eco-tourism projects in Tanzania and Uruguay, and now brings that wealth of experience to influence the design and development of senior living environments.*

If you enjoyed this e-book, we invite you to download another great read, “Bolstering First Impressions”, A Checklist for Senior Living Campuses.

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