The relationship between Bill Bensley's Resorts and Disneyland

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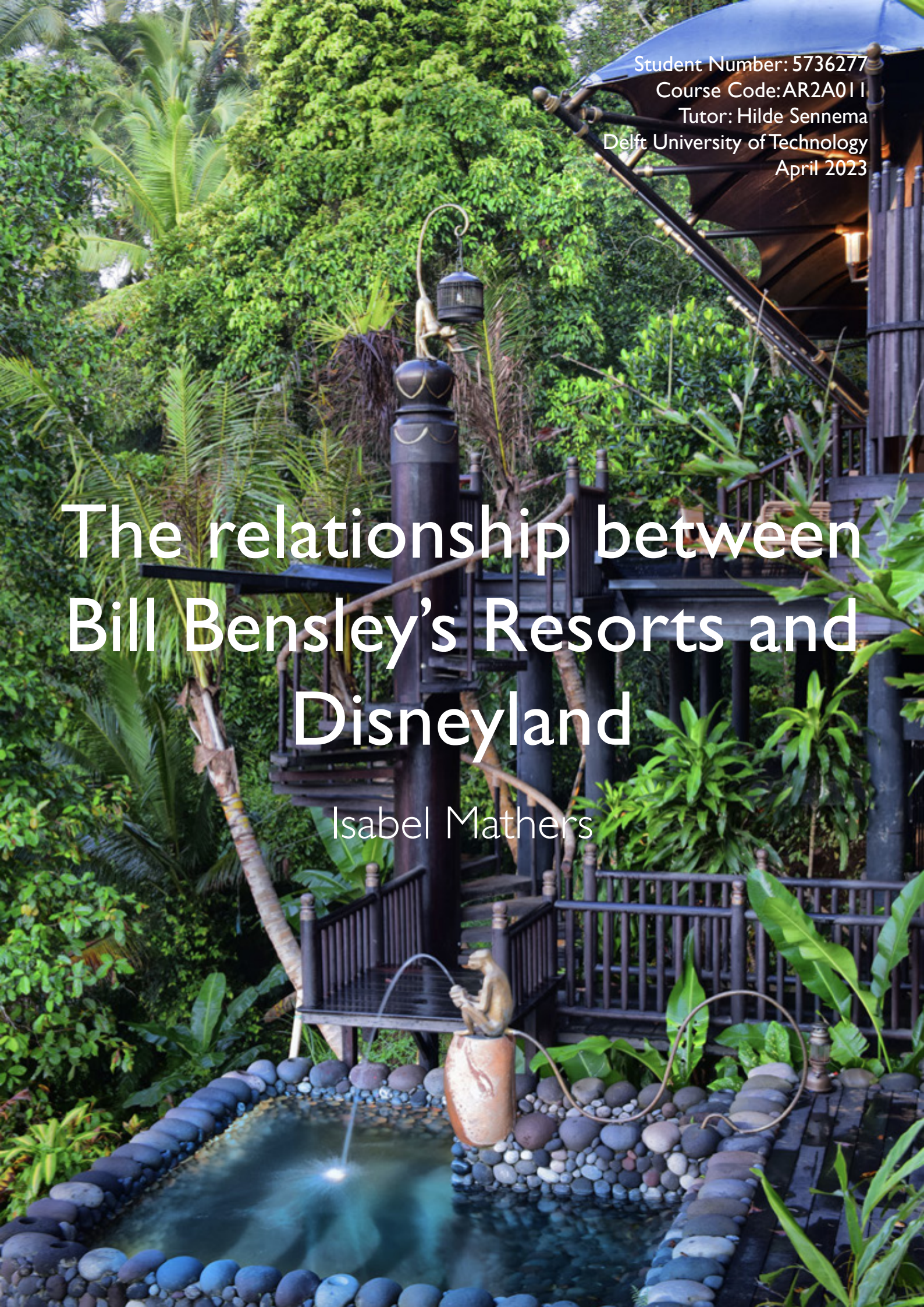
Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between the creation of escapism in Disneyland's theme parks and Bill Bensley's *Capella Ubud* and *JW Marriot Phu Quoc* hotels. Hotels are frequently the first place experienced upon arrival in an unfamiliar setting, and due to the transportive, experiential quality of their architecture, they can greatly influence how visitors perceive the traditions and atmosphere of these locations. To generate a sense of place and avoid bland interiors, Bensley creates rich backstories for these hotels which informs their design and enriches the guest experience. In this way, this thesis sees parallels between his hotels and Disneyland. Using analysis of hotel imagery and descriptive texts, this thesis outlines how Bensley has used similar techniques to create this sense of escapism throughout his career.

Disneyland's visitors are able to substitute real-world experiences with those in the park (e.g. a riverboat safari), as they are perceived to embody the essence of reality, so form hyperreality However, ultimately visitors are always aware that the park is fabricated fantasy. This is where Bensley's hotels differ from Disneyland. By grounding the hotels in site-specificity and authenticity, many visitors believe his hotels to embody the local vernacular, and to be truthful depictions of history, and thus they are more influential on visitor perceptions. Thus, this thesis uses analysis of guest reviews, travel articles and hotel photographs to demonstrate how his designs can lead to misunderstandings about local culture. Working within the framework of heritage, orientalism, and colonialism discussions, the thesis utilises critical discourse analysis to examine whether the image resulting from Bensley's design choices perpetuates stereotypes whilst achieving escapism. Bensley's work is particularly pertinent in this discussion as his maximalist, theatrical approach makes the celebration of surrounding heritage explicit. His work exaggerates the placemaking strategies commonplace throughout South-East Asian hotels, and so it can be used to exemplify more widespread trends in hotel design.

Keywords: Disneyland, tropical hotel design, escapism, hyperreality, guest reviews

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An example of a tent design, Capella Ubud

From: [Photograph of Capella Ubud tent], photograph, by BENSLEY (n.d.) accessed
29th March 2023 from https://www.bensley.com/project/capella-ubud/

Chapter 1: Introduction

Architects have the power to transport visitors to any imagined space of their choosing. American hotel-designer Bill Bensley describes this technique as storytelling (Hall, 2019). Born in 1959, this Harvard-educated architect is renowned in the field of South-East Asian hotels for his detail-rich, maximalist designs. He compares the process of designing a hotel to creating a movie-set (Hall, 2019), but in Bensley's hotels the spectators are not separated from the event by the screen of a movie-theatre. Instead, guests actively participate in the storyline: they reside within the stage-set like walls and become characters in the plot, ultimately resulting in a more stimulating stay. For example, Bensley's *Capella Ubud*, in Indonesia, tourists play the role of the Dutch colonial explorers of Bali, residing in a tented camp surrounded by paradisical rainforest. Within the *JW Marriot Phu Quoc Emerald Bay & Spa* (JW Marriott), hotel guests become 'students', attending cultural and sports classes, and residing in the fictional 19th Century Lamarck University, which Bensley has created on the Vietnamese island of Phu Quoc.

Within these hotels, Bensley has created experiential realms which prioritise the guest experience. In this way, Bensley can improve the profitability of hotels, as visitors are inspired to choose his fantastical designs over more bland, conventional resorts. Since Bensley's hotel designs have parallels with the fictional worlds of amusement parks, he describes himself as from Disneyland (Bensley, 2019). Like Disneyland, Bensley's designs also incorporate dramatic flair and theatrical illusions to ensure that his designs are as enchanting and all-encompassing as possible, but ultimately also increase profits. Therefore, this thesis will compare Bensley's design techniques to those of Disneyland, to demonstrate similarities between them.

However, where Bensley's hotels differ from amusement parks is in their grounding in authenticity. Visitors to Disneyland do not expect to experience reality in the amusement-park. They are aware that the themed worlds are entirely fabricated for their own enjoyment, embodying childhood desires and architectural styles from other areas to generate a sense of escapism (Chase, 1991; King, 1981, Nye, 1981). In South-East Asian hotels like Bensley's, visitors wish to experience authentic local culture (Wolff, 1995; Tan and Bensley, 2000; Echtner and Prasad, 2003), alongside this escapism that ensures an enjoyable holiday. Therefore, despite declaring that you should never allow the truth to constrict your stories (Hall, 2019), Bensley displays a deep passion for incorporating carefully researched local culture and history in his hotels. By skilfully connecting his fictional design narratives to the local context of each hotel, this thesis will argue that his work ultimately differs from Disneyland, by embodying the duality between authenticity and escapism.

By weaving authenticity into his meticulously fabricated site-specific narratives, Bensley has the capability to create site-specific narratives on the cusp of believability. The credibility of his fictional designs means that they are powerful in informing guest perceptions of an area. Tourists tend to choose hotels that align with preconceived notions of the location's characteristics (such as primitivism or exoticism), so that they can experience presumed authenticity (Rubin, 1995; Echtner and Prasad, 2003; McKercher and du Cros, 2002). As a result, architects like Bensley design hotels to match these preconceptions of how the location should look, perpetuating stereotypes about the area and forming a greater sense of the 'Other' (Kothari, 2015; Peleggi, 2005). Since hotels are one of the first buildings encountered by a visitor in an unfamiliar location, they shape first impressions of the local culture and so a creative adaptation of the surrounding culture can perpetuate orientalist stereotypes. Literature professor Edward Said outlined these stereotypes in his 1978 book *Orientalism*. Said used predominantly Middle Eastern examples to argue that Europeans have used exoticized cliches to represent the 'Orient' as inferior to the West, with consequences on global politics and behaviour today (Said, 1978). This thesis will draw upon these ideas of the orientalised 'Other' in relation to Bensley's work, to discuss the influence of his illusions on guest perceptions.

By examining just two of Bensley's hotels, the *Capella Ubud* and the *JW Marriott*, this thesis will analyse his designs and their effects on guests in more detail. These hotels have both opened in the last 10 years, and have since won numerous awards, so they can represent contemporary preferences in resort design. However, they differ to each other in their theming, scale and relationship to their local context, and so it is useful to examine whether this changes the influence that each hotel has on their guests, and their similarities with Disneyland's hyperreality. To frame this analysis, Chapter Two outlines the methods and theory within the design of Disneyland. In Chapters Three and Four, this study will analyse texts and images in Bensley's biographical works and hotel marketing to see how Bensley uses Disney-like tools to generate a sense of escapism. These chapters will also show how his designs differ to theme parks in their skilful design and authenticity, influencing how guests understand and experience local culture. To examine how the designs have been perceived by guests, this thesis will use a combination of Tripadvisor and Google reviews and more formal travel articles. This kind of website analysis has been increasingly used in the field of social sciences (Robinson and Schulz, 2011), and is particularly valid when evaluating consumer choices, as customers tend to look to websites for their first sources of data (Goodman and Douglas, 2010). Through these methods, this essay will conclude by outlining how the Bensley's powerful design narratives are more influential over the visitor than those of Disneyland.

Chapter 2: An Introduction to Disneyland and Hyperreality

Since the opening of the first Walt Disney resort in 1971, Disneyland's theme parks have been the centre of academic debate by architects and urban theorists. Initially, intellectuals saw the parks as tasteless: an accumulation of superficial simulations of 'real-world' architecture, created to simply increase sales (King, 1981), and too formalistic at a time when the 'form vs. function' debate was at its peak (Klingmann, 2007). However, visitors seemed to gain more joy from experiencing these parks than real-world public spaces in American cities. Therefore architects, such as the American Robert Venturi, and academics, such as Peter Blake, were soon writing about how ideas from Disneyland could be applied to contemporary architecture (Blake 1972; Goldberger, 1972). These critics praised the way that the parks captured the imagination of people from a variety of different backgrounds (Moore et al. 1984), prioritising the user experience in a way that modern architecture did not (Klingmann, 2007).

Parallels can be drawn between hotel architecture and the design of Disneyland, due to the sense of escapism that they both create. Disneyland's parks have been called 'The Happiest Place on Earth' (King, 1981, p.117). One reason for this is that they manifest visitor's deepest desires, and in doing so, provide an escape from reality (Klingmann, 2007). A similar effect also occurs in hotel architecture: resorts act as a different world where guests can experience their dreams (Rubin, 1995) and try out a different lifestyle (Volland, 2013). In Disneyland, designers created this escapism by carefully composing the vistas from each viewpoint, ride and procession, to build up the intended storyline, in a similar way to a film set (Kingmann, 2007; Finch, 1973). Architects have also used these techniques in hotel architecture, with the curation of views from entrance lobbies to entice you into the hotel beyond (Wolff, 1995). Like hotel architecture, the main goal of Disneyland is visitor enjoyment (Borrie, 1999). Therefore the designers of Disneyland's themed areas have not necessarily tried to represent geographical areas or history truthfully. Therefore, the term 'Disneyfication' has emerged, which can be defined as the idealisation of a real event or location to form a more controlled, family-friendly version (Merriam Webster, 2023) for entertainment or commercial gain. Since hotel designers, like Bensley, also ultimately attempt to maximise escapism and enjoyment when representing local cultures, the following chapters will demonstrate how hotel architecture can also be Disneyfied.

To demonstrate the similarities between Bensley's hotel architecture and Disneyland, this thesis will use Russel Nye's 1981 amusement park framework to compare the escapism methodology behind both. Nye demonstrates that theme parks are completely artificial environments, purpose-built for visitor enjoyment. He shows that park designers use techniques from theatre and filmmaking, to create fantastical experiential worlds. They also integrate visitors within the spectacle; unlike theatres, where guests are mere spectators, in theme parks they are immersed in the experience . For example, Figure 2.1 shows visitors to *Luna Park*, Disneyland's precedent, riding elephants rather than simply observing them. Nye also shows how visitors to Disneyland are not subject to usual rules of societal behaviour, and how they enjoy the chance to experience the thrills of adventure without actual danger in a sanitised simulation of the outside world (Nye, 1981). This thesis will demonstrate how Bensley has used each of these techniques in his hotel architecture.

In Disneyland, the use of these techniques has resulted in hyperreality. In philosopher Umberto Eco's text *Travels in Hyperreality* he outlines the theory using an example of a wholly artificial river safari ride in the theme park. He describes how visitors are guaranteed to see animals and have the full safari experience in this ride, whereas on an actual river safari, you may not have the chance to see a hippo or crocodile. Therefore, the Disneyland ride can replace and be an improvement of real-world experiences, forming hyperreality (Eco, 1990). In tropical hotel design, the 'real-world' experience that guests wish to experience is the authentic local culture, and yet this may be based on exoticised media-inspired stereotypes. Therefore, to meet visitor demands, hotels can create a distorted simulation of reality, by sanitising and Disneyfying local architecture, whilst incorporating 21st Century international standards of

luxury. These hotels are then also forming hyperreality, by substituting real-world experiences with simulations that are perceived to be an improvement and more 'real' than reality. This thesis will discuss how Bensley's use of Disney methodology has similarly formed hyperreality in his hotels.

Whilst there has been discourse connecting Eco's discussion of hyperreality to tourism in the built environment (Kennedy and Kingcome, 1998; Gable and Handler, 1996; Chen, 2019), these do not focus specifically on hotels, or analyse how hyperreality affects visitors. As architectural historian J. Volland has shown, hotel architecture has been historically under researched in scholarship (Volland, 2013). The most established analysis in the field of hotels and hyperreality was an investigation of Middle Eastern resorts, where architects have blended international architectural styles to maximise exoticization (Steiner, 2010). Steiner's description of hyperreality can also be seen in hotels outside the Middle-East, such as the late 20th Century *The Venetian Las Vegas* (Figure 2.2); despite representations of certain cultures, these hotels are never perceived as authentic due to their geographical separation from their theme's source, and their superficial décor.

attempted to incorporate heritage from the local area (Wolff, 1995; Tan and Bensley, 2000). As a result, Bensley's resorts and their hyperrealism is a particularly worth investigation due to its believability. As the following chapters will show, where there is a carefully crafted Balinese camp-themed hotel in Indonesia itself, claims of authenticity are more credible. Therefore, by examining Bill Bensley's hotels' hyperreality, and comparing this to visitor experiences in Disneyland, this thesis will demonstrate the power of his elaborately themed tropical hotel architecture. By only exploring this in two of his hotels, this essay will delve deeper into architectural detailing and guest perceptions than previous scholarship, but also hopes to also find themes that are relevant to the world of tropical hotel design more broadly.

Figure 2.2

The Venetian, Las Vegas

From: *Indoor replica of the Piazza San Marco at the shopping mall of the Venetian Resort Hotel Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada, United States,* photograph, by F. Schulenburg, 2018, accessed 29th March 2023 from (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Venetian_Las_Vegas#/media/File:Las_Vegas-5603_(The_Venetian).jpg)

These Middle-Eastern and American hotels' hyperreality relates more closely with that of Disneyland, as they are never taken at face-value. In Disneyland, the visitor is never meant to believe the elaborate narrative, but they must simply play along with it (Goldberger, 1972). However, this thesis will focus on Bensley's tropical South-East Asian resort design, as he has

Chapter 3: The Capella Ubud, Indonesia (2018)

3.1: An overview of the Capella Ubud

Figure 3.1.1

An example of a Capella Ubud tent within the forest

From: [Photograph of Capella Ubud tent], photograph, by BENSLEY (n.d.) accessed 29th March 2023 from https://www.bensley.com/project/capella-ubud/

The Bensley-designed *Capella Ubud* is unique amongst Bali's luxury hotels in its rich theming. The hotel comprises of 24 tented rooms (Figure 3.1.1), spread throughout a forested valley just north of Bali's touristic heart, Ubud. Neighbouring hotels create a similar sense of site-specificity by mixing the Indonesian vernacular with international styles across small Balinese-style tree-lined villas. However, the *Capella Ubud* differs in its highly elaborate storytelling. The hotel recreates the experience of being a Dutch spice trader in 19th Century Bali (Bensley, 2022), with each tent belonging to a member of the expedition team (e.g. the Translator or Cartographer). Each is decorated with the carefully curated local and colonial Dutch décor necessary to manifest their storyline. Therefore, it is relevant to investigate the *Capella Ubud* in this thesis, as Bensley's fantastical world is more closely aligned with Disneyland's all-encompassing storylines than other hotels on the island.

Since its opening in 2018, the Capella Ubud has been critically acclaimed by travel magazines, and was even named as *Travel and Leisure* magazine's best hotel in the world (Wogan, 2020). Critics praise the richly designed rooms, emphasizing the resort's fabricated yet transportive nature in descriptions like "immersive, theatrical experience" (Kinsman, 2023, para. 1). However, some ignore the Capella Ubud's fictitious qualities, instead describing it as the place to "[Find] the Bali You Came For", believing that it captures a sense of Bali before the mass tourism (Postman, 2018, heading). As a result, this chapter will break down how the *Capella Ubud* treads the line of Disneyfication, by creating a fictional representation of 19th Century Bali. Following this, the chapter will discuss the implications of these design choices on visitor perceptions and wider post-colonial debate.

3.2: The Creation of Primitive Luxury

The general layout of the Capella Ubud builds on themes of primordial paradise seen within Western tourist marketing for Bali. In Echtner and Prasad's 2003 *The context of third world tourism* study, they categorise the 'myths' that American travel agents use to market developing countries. These range from 'The Myth of the Unrestrained' (presenting countries, such as Fiji, as paradisical), to 'The Myth of the Uncivilised'' (showing locations like Namibia as unsophisticated, and full of savage beasts) (Echtner and Prasad, 2003; Britton 1979). Their work categorises adverts for South-East Asian areas, like Bali, as examples of 'The Myth of the Unchanged', where marketing shows tourists travelling back in time to unspoilt landscapes and ancient civilisation (Echtner and Prasad, 2003).

The Capella Ubud has been designed to align with preconceptions emerging from this 'Myth of the Unchanged' marketing, thus improving appeal to potential guests, as they can find the Bali that matches its paradisical depictions in the media. For *Capella Ubud*'s theme, Bensley was inspired by the story of the Balinese kingdom's discovery by the Dutch in the late 1500s. This is the point at which Bensley believes "things started to go downhill for Bali" (Bensley 2022, p105); by opening to the world, Bali was exploited by its colonisers, eventually becoming a commodified hotspot of mass-tourism. Therefore, in this resort Bensley hopes to recreate the unspoiled Bali visitors would have experienced before this, ironically by creating another tourist resort. He writes that the hotel 'preserves the feeling of being a secret onlooker to the forest, privy to the magical concert of Balinese birds in the early morning' (Bensley 2022, p.107), with 'preserves' implying a return to pre-globalisation Bali. To achieve this feeling, Bensley has similar techniques of illusion to the designers of Disneyland. At the *Capella Ubud*, each of the twenty-four rooms are spread throughout the rainforest, separated from the next by trees and the topography (Figure 3.2.1). As outlined in Nye's 1981 framework, amusement parks create fantastical worlds by deceiving the visitor. Similarly in the *Capella Ubud*, visitors are tricked into the feeling of entering the world of an adventurous explorer: they are unable to see other hotel users and can experience the mystical, unchanged landscapes promised to them 'The Myth of the Unchanged' marketing.

This illusion is not just visual, but all-encompassing. Despite the hotel's proximity to main roads and the town of Ubud, visitors are wholly convinced by the alternative universe created by Bensley's architecture. In online reviews, guests write that they feel as if they are "in the middle of the jungle" (Kate R 2022) and "seem to be in Eden" (One 2022), with the design achieving these feelings in a multi-sensory experience (Rachel 2022). In many, the main complaint is that the design veers too close to the true rainforest adventure; several mention problems with insects inside the tents (cherylkwan97 2022, JRW7373 2022, Gaurav A 2022), or the difficulties of navigating around the labyrinthine forest pathways (Nathan A, 2022). To create a truly believable rainforest explorer experience, these features of the hotel have veered away from sanitised Disneyfication (where rooms would be free of insects or risk), at the risk of making the guest's stay less enjoyable. Therefore, these criticisms tie into the main difficulties Bensley has had to face in the design of a richly themed experience: how to balance authenticity (of the jungle adventure) with escapism.

One area where this paradox is most apparent is in the *Capella Ubud*'s gym, which simultaneously attempts to recreate the experience of a shipwrecked Dutch explorer, whilst also bringing international standards of comfort. As can be seen in the advertising image in Figure 3.2.2, the theming of the gym still aligns with the intrepid traveller experience. The image is framed by highly elaborate local textiles on the walls, which identify this room as another of the tents on the site, and central to the room is an elaborately carved Balinese column. Rather

than artificial gym matting, the floor is the rich dark teak wood seen throughout Balinese traditional construction. The glimpses beyond the tent of the rainforest present the room as something remote, and undiscovered within the wilderness. On the other hand, aligned with each window is high-tech exercise equipment, making it apparent that this room has been designed as a gym, and is not simply the recreation of a Dutch settler's tent. As a result, the gym is one area where the resort has clearly achieved Disneyfication, by prioritising luxurious escapism over an authentic recreation of the 19th Century expedition. In amusement parks visitors can experience risk without danger, and similarly, this promotional image signifies that all guest needs will be met, despite the hotel's exotic, remote location. Like in Disneyland, behind the façade of an authentic colonial adventure, the emphasis of the design is ultimately the guest experience.
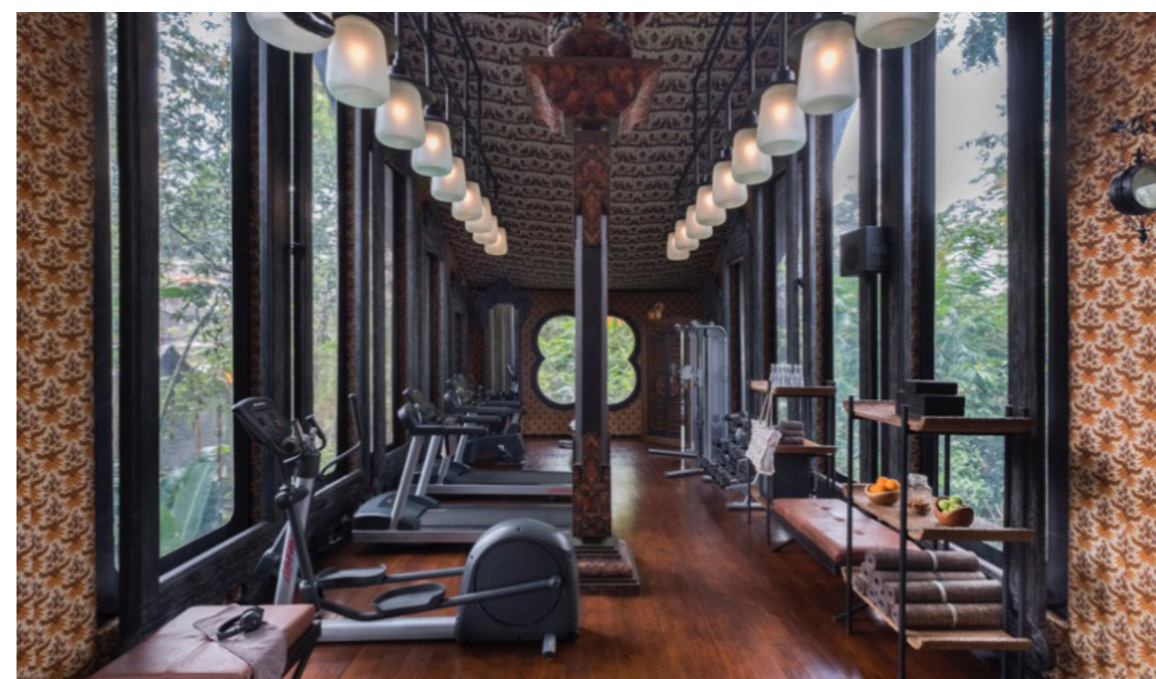
3.3: Connections to Balinese History

Using the hotel fact sheet, and examination of the images on the hotel website, it is apparent that many rooms are Dutch-colonial themed. Examples of these include the 'Explorer's Tent', which celebrates the 19th Century Dutch travellers, a 'Captain's tent', revealing the extravagance of being the commander in these early Dutch expeditions, and the 'Horn Collector's Tent', which presents the life of the person in charge of collecting valuables from the expedition (Capella Hotels, 2019). As Kothari (2015) has shown in other post-colonial tourist destinations, this celebration and re-enactment of the colonial period builds on Western nostalgia for imperialism. Although Bensley is simply representing a period of Balinese history to enrich the experience, since his design narratives are curated for guest enjoyment, they can glamorise the lifestyle of these colonial travellers and show tourists only selective parts of Balinese history. The colonial theming of the hotel is something that particularly appeals to the guests, with one reviewer writing: "I particularly enjoyed the whole mid 19th century explorer vibe. I really felt like Allan Quartermain, sans hunting rifle" (Yi Kang, 2022). By theming the hotel in this way, Bensley can materialise stereotypes visitors already have about the colonial period of Bali, and perpetuate them.

Another way that Bensley has been able to skew visitor perceptions of Bali is through the incorporation of products from other parts of South-East Asia. According to a sustainability paper that Bensley released, the incorporation of regional handmade materials is important in any hotel design, to reduce carbon emissions, keep artisanal skills in use, and "[tell] the story of that place in an authentic way" (Bensley, 2020, p.20). Despite the *Capella Ubud* predominantly adhering to this principle, in places guest enjoyment takes priority over authenticity. For example, one tent contains images of swords, royalty, and wayang shadow puppets (Bensley, 2022) which all originate from Java, another island in Indonesia. Historically, each Indonesian island was made up of different ethnic groups (EveryCulture, 2023), and so the incorporation of these Javanese items does not reflect local Balinese culture. Another example is the large two-bedroom Lodge, which features a Japanese bath (see Figure 3.3.1) and "an exotic, oriental Chinese colourscheme [sic] and design" (Capella Hotels, 2019, p.5). By using crafts from other parts of Asia to build his narrative of Balinese history, Bensley demonstrates themes from Said's 1978 *Orientalism*. Many tourists would not mind if decorations were non-Balinese, as long as their trip embodies pre-conceptions of Bali being an exotic, mystical land. By building a sense of the alien 'Other' with these pan-Asian products, Bensley can create a more adventurous, appealing room that appeals to these customers, but this risks materialising and then perpetuating these media-based stereotypes of Bali.

Figure 3.3.1

Japanese Bath in the Lodge

From: *Second Bedroom Ensuite*, photograph, by Capella Hotels (n.d.) accessed on 29th March 2023 from https://capellahotels.com/en/capella-ubud/accommodation/the-lodge-retreat

By blending antiques from across Asia to create a sense of the exotic, the hotel seems has parallels to amusement park design. Nye described how *Luna Park* (Figure 2.1), Disneyland's precedent, cherry-picked Asian decorations to create "illusions of the mysterious East" (Nye, 1981, p.68). However, since visitors to *Luna Park* did not perceive its generic pan-Asian décor in as an accurate portrayal of "The East" (Nye, 1981), the Capella Ubud has a more powerful influence over its guests. Bensley openly states the varied geographical origins of each product in his 2022 book *More Escapism*, and so theoretically visitors should not be misled into perceiving the mixed-Asian decoration as authentically Balinese. Despite this, Bensley's creation is convincing enough that the hotel can be marketed as "an ultra-luxurious tented camp that brings the myths of Bali's exotic past to life" (LHW, 2023). These beliefs have also transferred across to hotel guests: on Tripadvisor, reviewers write that "you will find yourself completely immersed in Balinese culture as soon as you step into the property" (Martha J, 2022), and that the Capella Ubud is "a dive into the history books" (Anthony S, 2022). Since these guests were from beyond Indonesia, these reviews indicate that the decorations can influence visitors' understandings of local culture, as they mistakenly believe the antiques to be Balinese. Therefore, whilst pan-Asian decorations are used in both amusement parks and hotels like the *Capella Ubud*, they have more power over visitors in the latter, despite designers' intentions.

3.4: The Capella Ubud and Disneyland

Although the narrative and theming is powerfully transportative, guests are aware that the design is artificial, with the interiors compared to a movie set (Guarav A, 2022, Vorobiev, 2023), or other imaginary places, with one reviewer describing the hotel as "The True Narnia of the modern world" (Jack, 2023). Since Narnia is a fictional world full of dream-like narratives, accessed from the real world through a wardrobe, this comparison positions the hotel as a similarly escapist wonderland. In this way, the *Capella Ubud* can be understood as Disneyfied; like in Disneyland, the theming of the hotel creates an experience that is more real than reality as it exaggerates ideas from the time-period that the designer hopes to recreate, and the architect is free to curate historical products to generate this user experience.

However, the implications of this Disneyfication have larger consequences in the *Capella Ubud* than in a theme park. Unlike the more generic themes of a geographical area in Disneyland, the specificity of the '19th Century Dutch settler in Bali' theme means that the hotel has more power as a simulation. As demonstrated, some visitors still perceive the hotel experience to be an accurate depiction of Balinese culture or history. Given that Bensley's design aligns with themes in Said's 1978 *Orientalism*, in the glamorisation of Dutch colonialism and incorporation of products from across Asia which exaggerate the sense of 'Other', his simulation of Dutch exploration has the power to perpetuate Orientalist and Colonial stereotypes. Whilst the transportive nature of his themed hotel is a testament to his ability as a designer, it also reveals the power that hotels can have on visitors' impressions of a local area.

Chapter 4: The JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay & Spa (2017)

4.1: An Overview of the JW Marriott

Upon comparison of Bensley's hotel design typologies, it is apparent that the *JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay Resort* (JW Marriott) is broadly different to the *Capella Ubud*. Whilst the *JW Marriott* is also popular amongst critics, winning numerous awards (such as *World's Leading Resort and Spa* (World Travel Awards, 2019)), it is of a completely different scale, with 250 rooms rather than the *Capella Ubud*'s 24. Instead of the *Capella Ubud*'s small scale rainforest tents, the hotel comprises large colourful blocks of accommodation along the beach of Phu Quoc island (Figure 4.2.1), and so is more similar visually to the mass-tourism resorts that Bensley typically opposes (Hall, 2019). Whilst in the *Capella Ubud*, Bensley reacted to a moment in local history, here the architect stated that he had to write his own history as the island was lacking in cultural richness (Bensley, 2022, p.295).

Despite these differences, this thesis will also examine the *JW Marriott*'s links to Disneyland, to see if this is a common theme throughout Bensley's designs. Like in every Bensley hotel, the *JW Marriott* has a strong design narrative to improve the guest experience, which takes centre-stage. Bensley imagined that a completely fictional university, dedicated to French naturalist Jean-Baptise Lamarck, might have stood on the site and been converted into this hotel after war-time destruction (Bensley 2022). The resulting 'Lamarck University' comprises eleven academic departments, which now contain guest rooms, spas and restaurants, spread along the central fabricated 'Rue de Lamarck' and throughout the college grounds. Given that the theme of this hotel is entirely artificial, Bensley openly states that "the expletive 'Disney' gets tossed around" (Bensley, 2022, p295). He counters that the *JW Marriott* does not feel like Disneyland, since $1 million was spent per room (Phagura, 2017), and so the high-quality finishes negate this effect (Bensley, 2022). This chapter will examine the ways that the *JW Marriott* still displays Disneyfication, through its storytelling and disconnection with surrounding areas, and whether this influences the visitor.

4.2: The Creation of Lamarck University

In 1981 Nye demonstrated that the complete fabrication of environments was a key characteristic of amusement parks (Nye, 1981), and this chapter argues that fiction is also a central element of the *JW Marriott*'s creation. Unlike at the *Capella Ubud*, where Bensley was reacting to specific moments and characters in Balinese history, here the storyline is entirely imaginary. Bensley's *Designing Paradise* documentary and the *JW Marriott*'s introductory hotel film both depict a compelling tale of the renowned Lamarck University's establishment on the island in the late 18th Century, its expansion with the arrival of French colonial families, its untimely destruction during the Vietnamese war, and recent restoration to form the hotel (Hall, 2019; JW Marriott Pho Quoc, 2017). Contrary to this story, every building has been recently constructed to form the hotel, and so like in a theme park, the environment is artificial.

Figure 4.2.1

Fading pastel colours as an optical device

From: *A general view of the JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay resort,* photograph by JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay, (n.d.) accessed 29th March 2023 from https://phuquoc-vietnam.info/jw-marriott-phu-quoc-named-best-resort-in-southeast-asia/

Nye's framework outlines how theme parks use theatrical techniques to create these all-encompassing fictional worlds. Bensley has used similar methodology bring the *JW Marriott*'s hotel backstory to life, and to make the 244-room hotel feel less imposing. For example, in Figure 4.2.1, Bensley makes the accommodation block seem smaller with the gradation of colour from pastel to white towards the top of the building. In the children's club, the entire building is scaled down to a smaller size (Figure 4.2.2 shows Bensley squeezing through the

small doorway). By using this technique across the resort, he prevents the hotel's scale from overpowering the guest. Disneyland's designers used a similar tactic: literally scaling down buildings to promote a sense of comfort and the human-scale within the park (Borrie, 1999). In Disneyland the buildings also act as stage sets, hiding the more mundane commercial functions behind themed facades. Bensley uses a similar technique across the *JW Marriott* to ensure that the Lamarck University illusion is convincing. In Figure 4.2.3, you can see the hotel's sports centre, which is completely hidden behind the yellow traditional Vietnamese shop-front exterior. Thus, the JW Marriott has similarities with Disneyland in the use of theatre to materialise a story.

Figure 4.2.2

Bill Bensley leaving the small doorway of the kid's club

From: *Lamarck puts on the dog,* by R. Hall, 2019, screenshot by I. Mathers

Figure 4.2.3

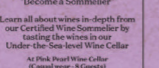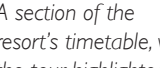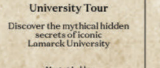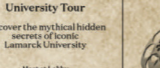*The exterior of the resort's sports club*
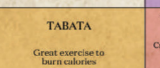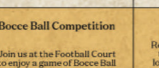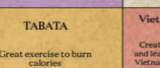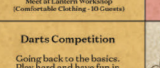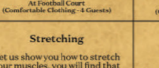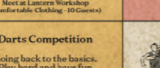
From: *Lamarck puts on the dog,* by R. Hall, 2019, screenshot by I. Mathers

However, despite these similar methodologies behind their creation, the *JW Marriott* differs from Disneyland, as not all visitors are aware that the theme is entirely fabricated. In Tripadvisor reviews and blogs, most guests describe the experience as "mythical" (SimonP, 2022), relating the hotel to a movie set (stevenjhandley, 2023; Coffey, 2017), and other fictional settings like Harry Potter or Alice in Wonderland (Ashish007, 2023; VickySham, 2022; SimonP, 2022), acknowledging that the hotel's backstory is imaginary. However, several are so convinced by Bensley's narrative that they write that they felt like graduates of the university upon their departure (M M, 2023), praising the conservation efforts of Bensley in bringing the university buildings back to life (SL14, 2022; Kendall_ashlee, 2022). The belief of Bensley's imagined story is not restricted to individual guest reviews; after describing the history of Lamarck University, a travel article states:

> "In January 2017 JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay saw the potential to brush off the dust and to resurrect the property back to her former glory as a one-of-a-kind beach resort through a restoration project led by hospitality designer Bill Bensley." (Haute Grandeur, 2015)

Since this article is advertising the hotel, it is using the believability of Bensley's narrative to attract potential customers. Some travellers may use this article to choose the hotel, thus perpetuating the idea that Lamarck University existed on site. As demonstrated by these reviews, the JW Marriott hotel exceeds the hyperreality of Disneyland in its power over visitors, as some guests believe the storyline.

In this situation, the believability of Bensley's fictional backstory simply enriches the guest experience. The narrative ties in closely with each room's actual use: for example, the 'Department of Chemistry' as the hotel bar, and the 'Student Registration Building' as the hotel lobby. In this way Bensley elevates standard hotel spaces to extra-ordinary experiences. Rather than reacting against the tackiness of an entirely artificial university, guests write that they love the campus feel, and discovering new details as they explore the hotel (Simon P, 2022; Huy K, 2022). By making the hotel an all-encompassing experiential realm like Disneyland, Bensley has succeeded in making the *JW Marriott* a destination-in-itself, rather than just a base from which to explore the island. This is evidenced by the popular hotel's 'campus tour' every other day (Ashish007, Jan 2023; Hsu H Oct 2022; Selin S, Aug 2022) (Figure 4.2.4), and a guest describing her request to move to different rooms after a few nights to encounter each department theme (Francis K, Sep 2022). As well as exploring Vietnam, visitors feel the need to explore the hotel, as Bensley has been so successful at creating this fictional world. In this way the hotel's theming is a powerful consumerist tool, as guests are incentivised to remain on site, increasing expenditure.

Figure 4.2.4

A section of the resort's timetable, with the tour highlighted

From: *Student Book*, by JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay, 2019, p.17, screenshot by I. Mathers

4.3: Interior Connections to Vietnam

As can be seen in the *Capella Ubud*, Bensley typically grounds the hotel within its context by incorporating the local vernacular, avoiding the Disneyland tabula rasa approach. Whilst the Lamarck University storyline is entirely fabricated, he uses real antiques to circumvent the superficial, plastic-nature of Disneyland, and give a sense of authenticity. To enhance the believability of the story, these chosen pieces specifically fit within the storyline's framework. For example, chair designs for the main dining room match those from the 1800s (Hall, 2019). In using these historic items, Bensley has been successful, as hotel guests describe how they distinguish the hotel from a theme park: "All manner of props and bric-a-brac flesh out the place, with much of it authentically antique, rather than shop-bought gimmicky plastic, and that helps give it soul." (Coffey, 2017). However unlike at the *Capella Ubud*, Bensley does not attempt to source these locally. Instead, he visited Europe, using antiques fairs such as that in Lincoln, to find items that fit his storyline, even if they are not Vietnamese (Hall, 2019; Bensley, 2022). He then paints or manipulates these products to portray them as historic university items (e.g. with a Lamarck university label) (Hall, 2019). This is a key example of how the *JW Marriott*'s theming is more powerful than Disneyland: the decorations are also partly fabricated, but since they were originally antiques they are capable of enhancing the hotel's sense of authenticity.

Despite many of these individual products being from overseas, most fit into the theme of 19th Century French-Vietnamese heritage. For example, in Figure 4.3.1, the patterned marble floors, ornate ceiling, wall mouldings and colouring clearly relate to French neo-classical interiors from the late 19th Century, but the inclusion of the elaborate metal lanterns, dark wooden geometric doors and aged green doors demonstrate a Vietnamese influence. This French colonial storyline is seen throughout the hotel; in some rooms a photographer was commissioned to depict "the most photogenic colonial premises" (Bensley, 2022, p.359). During the colonial period, French policies only benefitted the colonisers, with most Vietnamese deprived of land, rice and jobs in modern sectors of the economy (Britannica, 2023), and so by depicting this period in an alluring manner, Bensley risks sugar-coating history. However, the *JW Marriott*'s colonial theming has not had the same effect on guests as the *Capella Ubud*. The *JW Marriott*'s visitors only mention the French colonial architecture in passing, when describing the hotel's appearance. The style simply reflects historic trends in Vietnamese architecture, making Bensley's design appear old enough to align with its highly elaborate backstory. Therefore, despite both hotels incorporating colonial theming, they differ in their impact due to the role guests play in each storyline. At the *JW Marriott*, the guests do not become colonial explorers, but rather more innocent Lamarck University students, with

the French-Vietnamese colonial décor only making this fictional world more believable.
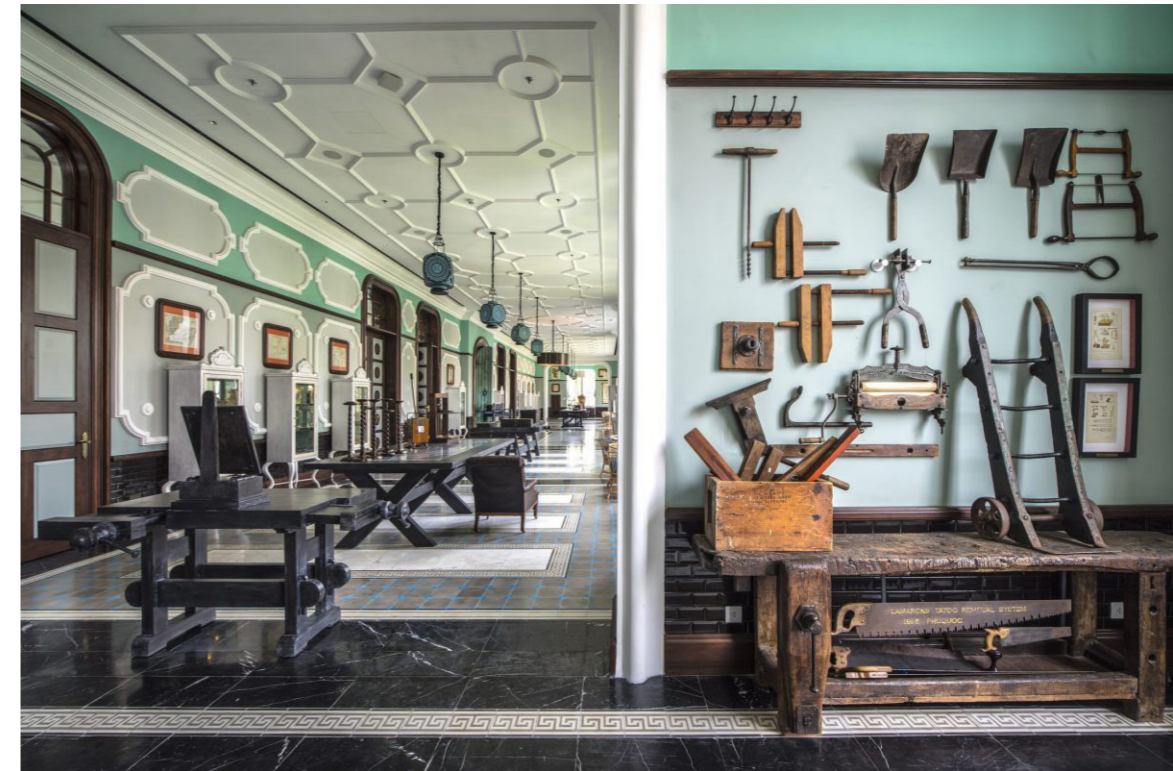
Figure 4.3.1

Auditorium foyer with French and Vietnamese influences

From: JW Marriott Phu Quoc, photograph, by BENSLEY (n.d.) accessed on 29th March 2023 from https://www.bensley.com/project/jw-marriott-phu-quoc/

4.4: Exterior Connections to Vietnam

Bensley also connects the hotel to its Vietnamese context within its key public spaces. As can be seen in Figure 4.4.1, the hotel is centred around a main street called *Rue de Lamarck*, which is lined with the hotel's public functions (like shops, spa and restaurants), with the accommodation blocks spreading out from this strip. Bensley describes this street as resembling the famous streets of Hoi An (Hall, 2019), even featuring a weekly night market inspired by those elsewhere in Vietnam. In Figure 4.4.2 you can see a photograph from the streets of Hoi An, with street vendors seated in front of slightly crumbling yellow buildings, bright red traditional lanterns, and a web of power cables overhead. Whilst the hotel's *Rue de Lamarck* (Figure 4.4.3) features the same-coloured buildings and lanterns, it is a sanitised version of the street, which only hotel guests can access. The 'merchants' houses' are crisp and polished, housing luxurious French delis and beachwear outlets rather than local products. Instead of a tangle of power cables, the shop fronts hide extensive HVAC ducts providing air-conditioning to the rooms. In simulating and 'improving' Hanoi's streets, the *Rue de Lamarck* is an example of the JW Marriott reaching Disneyfied hyperreality; it is 'better' than reality itself.

Figure 4.4.2

The Streets of Hoi An

From: *The narrow streets of Hoi An are crowded with yellow-painted timber-and-stone merchants houses,* photograph, by AWL Images (n.d.) accessed on 29th March 2023 from https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/travel/2019/12/day-hoi-vietnam

Figure 4.4.1

A map of the resort, with its central Rue de Lamarck

From: *Student Book,* by JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay, 2019, p.4, screenshot by I. Mathers

Figure 4.4.3

Rue de Lamarck, JW Marriott, Phu Quoc Emerald Bay

From: *Exterior of JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay Resort & Spa, Vietnam,* photograph, by Inspiring Travel (n.d.) accessed on 29th March, 2023 https://www.inspiringtravel.co.uk/asia/vietnam/phu-quoc/hotels/jw-marriott-phu-quoc-emerald-bay-resort-spa

Guests perceive this hyperreal staging of true Vietnam to be authentic, giving them a romanticised understanding of the country. One online reviewer proclaims that "You don't have to travel all the way to Hoi An… you can have the same experience [at Rue de Lamarck]. Without as many tourists!" (Victoria et al. 2023). In this way, guests substitute experiences of the surrounding area with those at the *JW Marriott*; guests stay within the resort, spending their money in resort shops without feeling the need to visit local cities. As seen with the campus tours, Bensley's believable and elaborate storytelling mean that the *JW Marriott* is the

destination, not just accommodation. The impeccable appearance of *Rue de Lamarck*, and its exclusivity, relate to the artificial perfection of Disneyland (King, 1981) and Nye's description as theme parks as a place to experience risk without danger, in a sanitised version of reality (Nye, 1981). Since travel articles describe the street as "A Lesson in Vietnamese History" (Fused, 2017, para. 16) and "emulating Hoi An's iconic atmosphere" (Liao, 2018, para. 2), the perfection of this shopping street risks giving visitors a romanticised, false perception of Hoi An, devoid of its cultural richness.

Like Disneyland, the hotel has clear boundaries; only specific consumer groups can enter and the gates that prevent any danger encroaching on the resort. However, in theme parks, all vistas and atmospheric conditions are curated, to not spoil the intended illusion. For example, in Disney World Florida, no power cables are visible (King, 1981) and a polluted lake was even drained, lined with white sand and re-filled with clear water to create a vision of pristine nature (Goldberger, 1972). This is where Bensley's designs differ from Disneyland; whilst his internal staging creates a stronger narrative than most hotels, he is unable to control the surrounding area. Therefore, numerous guests complain on Tripadvisor about the beach's dirtiness, and plastic bags in the water (Tae Wanderer, 2022; Alisdairj, Feb 2023, Stephen U, Nov 2022). Whilst Bensley's hotels can control the sanitised vision within their boundaries, they cannot create the same sense of an undisrupted fantasy without borders as in Disneyland.

4.5: The JW Marriott and Disneyland

Both the *Capella Ubud* and the *JW Marriott* are related to Disneyland, as they are completely fabricated environments involving visitors in their spectacle, but this chapter demonstrates how the latter is more Disneyfied due to the fictional nature of its backstory. In the *Capella Ubud*, Bensley's designs are more closely tied to the local area, as the Dutch settler narrative is intrinsically tied to Bali and so Bensley incorporates Balinese artifacts to materialise this tale. Given the resulting connection to its surroundings, many more guests perceive the *Capella Ubud* as an authentic representation of expeditions to Bali. Whilst some visitors also believe in the JW Marriott's storyline, since this is centred on the fictional 'Lamarck University', rather than actual cultural or historic events, it has a lower risk of shaping visitor understandings of Phu Quoc island or colonial history. Instead, the power of the JW Marriott lies in its larger scale characteristics. The hotel's size and the success of its theme amongst guests mean that the *JW Marriott* is seen as a 'destination' that you never need to leave during your stay. Therefore, the *JW Marriott* is similar to Disneyland in its influence on guest expenditure. Like Disneyland, its fictional theming explicitly prioritises guest enjoyment over reality or local culture, and this ensures high occupancy rates. However, these visitors come to experience the hotel, rather than the surrounding area, and so may not spread their purchasing power outside the hotel's boundaries.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

As can be seen through the analysis of the *Capella Ubud* and the *JW Marriott*, many parallels can be drawn between techniques used to create escapism in Bensley's hotels and in Disneyland. Like Disneyland, Bensley's hotels are completely fabricated environments, which try to embody guest desires through designs that are exciting and exotic as possible. These worlds are purpose-built to maximise the visitor's enjoyment, involving the guest in the spectacle, but keeping it devoid of any actual danger. As can be seen in Disneyland, the focus on the guest experience in Bensley's hotel designs means that the truth can be slightly twisted to incorporate Western ideals of comfort, and to meet visitor expectations of what an authentic visit to a South-East country should look like. Bensley's use of these Disneyland-like devices has enabled his hotels to reach a stage of hyperreality, where his manifestation of fictional storylines in built-form can be considered 'more real' than the reality that could be experienced elsewhere in the country.

The hyperreality of Bensley's hotels ultimately has more power than that within Disneyland. In Disneyland, visitors feel that they are experiencing the essence of a real-world experience, but they are always conscious that the experience is completely fabricated. However, in the *JW Marriott* and *Capella Ubud*, visitors are not always aware that the hotel backstories are fictional. Whilst for many it is obvious that the *Capella Ubud* is not actually a Dutch settler camp, and the *JW Marriott* is not a renovated university, components of these hotels still have the power to deceive guests. This is partly the result of Bensley's hotels' tropical location; unlike aforementioned hotels in Las Vegas or the Middle-East where the theming is separate from their context, Bensley's resorts are in such culturally rich settings that his site-specific narratives are believable. If the *Capella Ubud* or *JW Marriott* were to be relocated outside South-East Asia, guests may be more aware of their fictional nature. The credibility of Bensley's designs is also a result of his incredible talent as a storyteller. Bensley grounds every tale in a fragment of truth, from the large-scale (e.g. the connection of a hotel theme to historic events) to the small (e.g. the use of authentic local craftsmanship).

As evidenced by analysis of visitor reviews, the believability of Bensley's hotels can have problematic implications on guest perceptions of local culture. In the *Capella Ubud*, the theming of the hotel could result in a glamorisation of colonialism, and the use of pan-Asian antiques under the bracket of authenticity could result in Said-style orientalism and misunderstanding of Balinese culture. In the *JW Marriott*, the university theming is less believable, but the success of the theme may result in guests substituting real-world Vietnamese experiences with exploration of the hotel grounds. Further surveys could be made to examine exactly how visitor impressions of the country have changed after a stay at a Bensley hotel, as these conclusions are drawn from informal descriptions in guest reviews.

Whilst the design of Bensley's hotels may be more extreme in their staging than the conventional South-East Asian resort, their popularity, and awards (as best hotels in various categories) demonstrate that they signify current trends in the market of hotel design. As more of South-East Asia becomes globalised with the rise of mass tourism, more guests may look to hotels to find the exotic, authentic experiences romanticised in the media on their travels. Despite Bensley ultimately only trying to weave a narrative that enriches the guest experience in the hotel, his talent for storytelling inadvertently influences visitor perceptions of the country and its history. Although Bensley manages to keep artisanal traditions alive by sourcing decorations locally, less conscientious designers on lower budgets may simply use foreign products to build up their own hotel storylines. As this thesis has demonstrated, it is logical for hotel designers to use Disney-like techniques to create richly themed, financially successful resorts, but they should be aware of their influence over visitors. With more skilfully themed hotels opening internationally, it will become more difficult for guests to understand the line between "authenticity" and "escapism" on their travels.

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