

by Jamie Hecker



Jamie Hecker has been a lifelong fan of Disney, and is passing on his love to his sons. He and his family visit Orlando annually and always look forward to their next trip. When not in Orlando, he resides in northern Virginia with his beautiful wife Suzanne, two boys and four cats. You can read more about his "hidden Disney" musings at myhiddendisney.blogspot.com/

John Hench

In the vast history of the Walt Disney Company, there have been countless men and women who have made lasting contributions to animation, live action films, and theme parks. Many are artists within a specific discipline. However, only a handful of Disney veterans have been able to rise above the rest and make an indelible mark on the cultural landscape. In this regard, Disney Legend John Hench and his transcendent work resonates to this day with Disney fans, young and old alike. His masterful understanding of color and design helped create Disney theme parks that contributed to the Disney concept of 'architecture of reassurance,' that Disneyland and Walt Disney World represent a curated and comforting slice of Americana. John Hench was, in every sense of the word, Disney's renaissance man.

Hench was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 1908, but grew up in southern California, where he attended art school at the California School of Fine Arts. He further studied at the acclaimed Chouinard Institute, where so many other Disney animators honed their skills. Hench was particularly influenced by painter Stanton MacDonald-Wright, who "helped me to enlarge my understanding of color, to see it as a dynamic element," Hench later recalled.

At the young age of twenty-one, he joined Disney in 1939 when The Walt Disney Studios was operating at its Hyperion studio location. The Disney studio, building on the overwhelming success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, was ramping up its ambitions in feature animation. Hench was part of an ongoing hiring increase to directly address this goal. His first project was working as a sketch artist on *Fantasia*, notably contributing the underwater effects



on the 'Arabian Dance' sequence. He sharpened his artistic and animation skills as a background painter on *Dumbo* and a layout designer for *The Three Caballeros*. Although he never did character animation, his contributions were perhaps more important, setting the overall color and style for the films, notably *Peter Pan*. As Disney moved into live-action films, Hench shifted as well, and earned himself an Oscar for his work on the hydraulically powered squid from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

From the Films to the Parks

Walt Disney had greater plans for Hench and personally directed him to work on the next great project – Disneyland. Hench joined a small cadre of designers at WED, the precursor to Imagineering. Hench, when laying out the original Tomorrowland, discovered that the process of designing theme parks was his true calling. As Disneyland grew and changed over the years, so too did Hench's design work. New Orleans Square, added in 1966, is a master display of the emotional impact that

a themed space can convey.

Hench further enhanced his story, color, and design skills when WED developed four attractions for the 1964-65 New York World's Fair. To this day, Walt Disney's Carousel of Progress still turns, showcasing Hench's work for new generations of Disney fans.

With its "blessing of size," WED next set its sight on the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World. Beyond the park, there was the overall property to be developed. Hench made a critical decision that would enhance the overall property. Canals were needed to help mitigate the swampiness of the property. Rather than cut utilitarian-like straight channels, Hench successfully argued that the canals should be organic, curving around the contour of the land and of various widths, much like how a stream, creek or river naturally appears.

Hench laid out the master plan for the Magic Kingdom, and with Imagineers under his direction, they followed his credo for theme park design: "When we design any area of a Disney park, we transform a space into a story place. Every element must work together to create an identity that supports the story of that place – structures, entrances

and exits, walkways, landscaping, water elements, and modes of transportation. Every element must in its form and color engage the guests' imagination and appeal to their emotions." Not only was the design of the park critical, but the layers and colors within needed to match the scene. Hench elaborated, "We must always remember that color is a language to which people respond, both consciously and unconsciously. They know when colors do not seem right together, but they may not know why. It is the Imagineer's job to understand how colors work together visually and why they can make guests feel better."

One of the most iconic sites at the Magic Kingdom is Space Mountain, with its conical appearance and towering spires that reach for the stars. Hench worked with Walt himself in the mid 1960s to design the concept for the attraction, then called Space Port, but the ride technology



eluded them. At Imagineering, however, no idea is ever truly put aside, and Space Mountain was finally opened in 1975 to critical acclaim. Hench recalled, "It took us ten years before we found the technology that would allow such a ride. And during these ten years, I had a model that I kept, waiting for the technology we needed."

Hench further cemented his status as a theme park designer with his work on Epcot and then Tokyo Disneyland. He helped finalize the iconic appearance of Epcot's Spaceship Earth, and solved the engineering dilemma of how to create a fully formed sphere. The six support legs hold a table, with a quarter of the sphere resting below it, and three-quarters of it resting above.

To give an example of Hench's innate understanding of color, consider that he bragged about having fifty-three

shades of white in his palette. His understanding of the nature of white was critical all over Epcot, and in particular, the American Adventure show building. This stately colonial-style building uses four colors of brick, all authentic to the era. White may seem a natural accent color to choose, but Hench applied his knowledge of color theory masterful-

ly on this process. He noted, "I selected three different shades of white to adjust the color of the lavish trim for exposure to natural light: the brightest white for the first floor trim, to correct for shadows, a slightly darker off-white shade for the second floor, and the darkest shade for the clock tower and bell towers, to equalize the effect of unfiltered sunlight. Manipulating the shades of white in this way gave the illusion of a consistent trim accent color."

All told, Hench enjoyed a sixty-five year career at Disney. He may have slowed down toward the end, but he never formally retired. He was named a Disney Legend in 1990, and continued to do critical theme park design work after that, with meaningful contributions to Disney's California Adventure and Disney's Animal Kingdom.

He passed away on February 5, 2004 at the age of 95 while still working full-time for Imagineering.