



# LAWS OF ATTRACTIONS

*Inside India's largest theme park*

**JAMES CRABTREE**

| ONE |

**R**ENATO FRANCESCHELLI WALKED HURRIEDLY towards the magic carousel on a baking Saturday afternoon in the middle of April, just three days after the opening of Adlabs Imagica, which styles itself as India's first international-class theme park. The ride provided the "Arabia" zone with a gentle, almost reassuring presence, unlike the expansive mocked-up Ali Baba palace and soaring roller-coaster nearby. A handful of pushchair-wielding parents stood around the edge, watching it turn and pondering which attraction to visit next, while their children bobbed up and down contentedly on gaily-painted animals. Franceschelli, by contrast, looked worried.

Dressed in a designer white shirt and tight dark blue jeans, Franceschelli has a distinctly European air, although his sing-song Italian accent comes with a clear American twang. Although generally upbeat and cheery, he frowned ever so slightly as he gazed out over the colourful mishmash of attractions that he had spent the best part of four years creating. Not everything in the first few days had gone exactly to plan. "One thing we have learned already is we are going to have to stay open later," he told me, shielding the strong afternoon light from his eyes. The park closed at 8 pm each evening, he explained. But "then it's hot in the sun in the day so when it gets cool, they want to stay on. These first few days the kids are still getting wet in the fountain at eight at night, and that means they don't want to leave. And if they don't want to leave, their parents don't want to leave either."

Visitors were another concern, although Franceschelli played this down. The park seemed sparsely populated, even if many guests were taking shelter from the heat at one of five themed restaurants, or inside its numerous "dark" rides: large, air-conditioned indoor installations, among them a water feature involving large animatronic dinosaurs and a lurching flight simulator, based on the movie *Mr India*. Waves of shrieks wafted over from the right, from what Franceschelli describes as the adrenaline zone, where a handful of braver patrons were being hurled nearly upside down at heights of 140 feet or more on an unpleasant yellow-and-purple tripod contraption with a large swinging arm, known as the Scream Machine. Closer at hand the scene was tranquil, with a central lake, filled by a pumping station hidden behind its main waterfall, and a large wooden pirate



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ship-cum-tapas bar (known as the “Arrmada”) marooned on the far side. Above it all stood the park’s centrepiece: a Sleeping Beauty castle painted in white, red and blue. With flags fluttering atop each of nine fairytale turrets, this had been designed to provide visitors with both a focal point and a large covered dining hall, although this last feature, like a number of others in the park, was not yet open.

His mane of elegant swept-back hair is greying, white in places, and Franceschelli flattened it with his hands from time to time as he talked of a handful of other small glitches. The park had originally been scheduled to open five months earlier, but despite a dash to open on time, construction had been delayed, design plans had changed and rides—many imported from manufacturers in the West—were delivered late. Now there were a few other teething troubles too, from minor attraction malfunctions to problems persuading guests to wait in the lengthy lines that dominate every large ride. “People in this country really do have absolutely no patience at all,” Franceschelli said, with a weary smile.

Even so, he talked with boyish enthusiasm about the park as we walked away from the carousel, headed down a series of steps that led to a walkway around the edge of the lagoon, and eventually ducked behind the waterfall to view the pump mechanics inside. Having emerged, he described Imagica in almost organic terms—not as a static project, but a living, evolving organism, whose charm comes in part from foibles that need tending. Features once sketched out on a designer’s plan were being tested hour by hour by customers coming through the gates, and Indian customers at that—a demanding demographic with whose tastes very few international theme park designers have had to grapple. “That is why I am still here,” he explained, as we walked back around the lake and came to a stop next to the pirate ship restaurant. “No one has done this here before, but we know from other times that this is when you need to be here, now, to see how it is all working. You need to feel the rhythm of the park.”

Franceschelli left Italy for California in his twenties. Despite barely being able to speak English, he landed a job a couple of years later as an “imagineer”, one of the Walt Disney Company’s cadre of professional park designers, with backgrounds ranging from animation and design to engineering and, like Franceschelli, in architecture. It was an early break that kicked off a career designing everything from individual rides to entire ‘themed’ hotels, resorts and parks, and included a spell with Universal Studios, another major park operator.

Three and a half years ago, while working on a resort project in the Chinese tourist enclave of Macau, he received an unexpected phone call from a contact in the industry. A group of foreign consultants were being brought over to India to meet Manmohan Shetty, a Bollywood entrepreneur with a quixotic plan to build a new theme park on a patch of scrubland, midway between Mumbai and Pune. Would Franceschelli like to come along to meet him, the contact asked, and perhaps ultimately work on the project too? “I thought, it’s never been done before,” Franceschelli told me, with a grin. “So I said, why the hell not, you know?”

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Manmohan Shetty had made a minor fortune selling his Adlabs cinema chain—hence the park’s name—to billionaire Anil Ambani for ₹360 crore (\$83 million) in 2005. Having stuck it out with his new parent for three years, he quit in late 2008 and began to ponder a longstanding dream: building a theme park in India of the same standard as one might find in Florida or California.

For decades, Shetty had been one of the entertainment industry’s most successful impresarios. Having started out working in a film processing lab in Bombay in the 1970s, he set up his own company, Adlabs, which made films for the advertising industry, in 1978. He went on to set up a major cinema chain, which pioneered the introduction of multiplex screens in Mumbai, as well as the country’s first IMAX screen in 2001. Just as major theme park operators such as Disney and Universal have deep backgrounds in the movie business, Shetty, too, had worked in and around Mumbai’s film scene for decades, producing pictures, backing directors and befriending stars. Now he saw a new possibility, in a country that stood out as the last large untapped Asian market for the global theme park industry, with a growing middle class that had money to spend and a taste for Western-style entertainment experiences.”

His claim to have now built India’s first theme park is questionable. More than a dozen smaller attractions already operate elsewhere around the country: from the Essel World theme and water park in Mumbai, to Ramoji Film City, a vast movie studio with rides and themed areas in Hyderabad. Nonetheless, Imagica was designed to be of a different order. The 3 million visitors Shetty hopes to attract in a typical year is nearly twice the number Essel World claims to bring in, a figure that would also make Imagica the first Indian theme park to nose its way into the 20 most-visited such sites in Asia. A substantial portion of its ₹160 crore (\$27 million) budget would be spent on rides from the same international companies that supply the likes of Disney, many costing millions of dollars each. The park’s 300-acre plot is roughly five times larger than Essel World, providing sufficient space for hotels and a water park, with an eye on building shopping malls and residential housing complexes in the future as well. At its heart would be a Disneyland-style park, with five themed zones, three giant roller-coasters and roughly two dozen other attractions, many with specially created Indianised themes.

For all that, the project presented formidable challenges. Land had to be acquired and bank financing secured, along with reliable electricity and water supplies. The park’s eco-

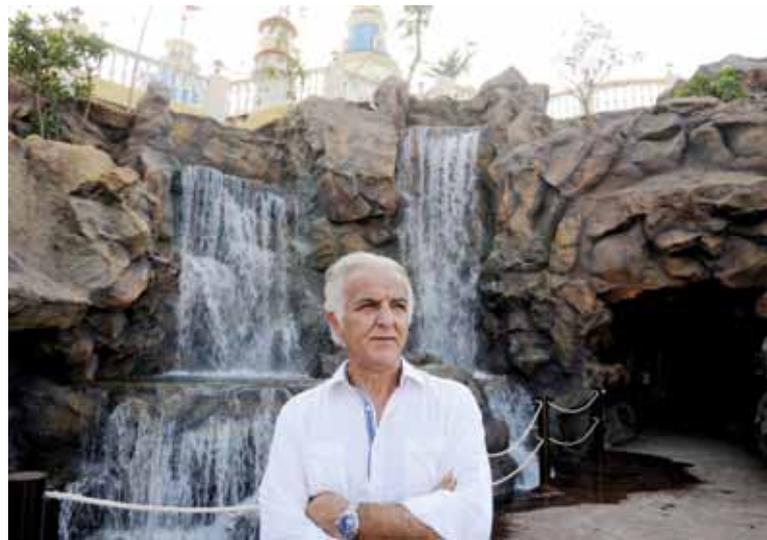
nomics needed to be thrashed out, a complex process that involved the creation of sophisticated demographic models of the population in the park's catchment area, and then a healthy amount of guesswork about exactly how many of them could be persuaded to travel out to the location, pay the price of entry, and perhaps pick up a meal or souvenir fluffy toy during their stay. Thousands of staff would have to be hired and trained, while the facility needed to be professionally maintained, and above all, free from accidents. A little like giant cruise ships or Las Vegas hotel complexes, such parks also must provide sophisticated, highly controlled forms of entertainment. They need to be both efficient in operation—moving thousands of customers around and through rides, with a minimum of queuing and confusion—but also fantastical and immersive, drawing influences from popular culture and make-believe alike to create what amounts to a three-dimensional immersive storybook. It is a delicate mix, which is why designers like Franceschelli borrow insights from disciplines as varied as social anthropology and behavioural psychology, all with the aim not just of entertaining their guests, but of understanding and delighting them.

Theme parks can also function as a curious, technicolour benchmark for national progress. Companies such as Disney know that their facilities succeed only when host countries pass certain thresholds of development, when citizens have enough disposable income, and governments can provide sufficiently developed public infrastructure. With this in mind, Disney is now investing somewhere in the region of \$4 billion to create its first theme park in China, due to open in Shanghai in 2015. Most industry analysts agree that, in time, the company will open one in India too. But for now, senior Disney executives have said that the country is some distance away from the level that could support one of its own landmark parks. “Andy Bird, the head of Disney International, was here recently. He was quoted as saying that ‘we have no plans for a Disneyland park in India. Not now, not later,’” Manmohan Shetty said during the park's launch in April. India, Disney's thinking goes, isn't ready. Shetty's gamble is that they are wrong.

## | TWO |

**I**N HIS 2008 BOOK, *Theme Park*, the anthropologist Scott Lukas dates his subject's history—“metaphorically”, at least—to the prehistoric caves at Lascaux in south-western France, where human beings gathered together to view Paleolithic paintings. In a less abstract sense, mass entertainments featuring spectacles and rides began to pop up in European and American cities in the aftermath of the industrial revolution, from the pleasure gardens that dotted Victorian London and the “illuminations”—an annual display of festive electric lights—of northern England's Blackpool pleasure beach, to the parks that opened on New York's Coney Island towards the end of the 19th century.

It was Coney Island in particular that first popularised attractions with “themes”: the original Luna Park, an ancestor of the modern complexes of the same name, offered a



Renato Franceschelli at Adlabs Imagica. SUDHARAK OLWE FOR THE CARAVAN

popular space-themed “trip to the moon” ride, for instance. These were a new kind of fun palace, designed to appeal to an emerging and relatively prosperous strata of waged labourers, and offering a distinctly classless American ethos. As Italian immigrant Giuseppe Cautela wrote for essayist HL Mencken's *American Mercury* magazine in 1925: “When you bathe in Coney, you bathe in the American Jordan. It is holy water. Nowhere else in the United States will you see so many races mingle in a common purpose for a common good. Democracy meets here and has its first interview, skin to skin.”

These amusement parks proved popular, but it wasn't until after the Second World War that their various elements were brought together into what quickly became known as a “theme” park. “The classic examples were Disney in the 1950s, and then Six Flags Over Texas,” Lukas told me. (He worked as a staff trainer in another Six Flags facility for two years in his twenties, the start of an interest in the topic that he carried forward into academia.) “If you look at Blackpool pleasure beach, for instance, it is a great space, but it doesn't theme either the rides or the lands. What distinguishes a theme park [from an amusement park] is a level of immersive storytelling. You are telling a story of place, of events, of history.”

It was perhaps no accident that the most famous example of this immersive, pseudo-cinematic experience was born in California, as the brainchild of a man with a background in the film industry. Walt Disney's “Disneyland” opened in Anaheim in 1955, creating a template that many others would reference, if not copy entirely—specifically, a gigantic entertainment complex with a series of themed areas, such as Fantasyland or Tomorrowland, as its foundation. Where the older generation of amusement parks catered to a predominantly urban, industrial population, Walt Disney's customers were car-driving suburbanites. And while its predecessors were seedy, raucous places—frequented by cavorting youth and operated by tattooed, brusque staff—Disneyland was different: its visitors were to be families,



**The Scream Machine at Imvika spins, then swings its passengers into the air to heights in excess of 140 feet.**

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and they were to be enticed in by the promise of a clean, safe experience that offered a carefully unthreatening, child-friendly form of fantasy.

There were other changes too, many drawn from Walt Disney's own background in the business of movies and animation. Rather than employees, the staff at his new facility were styled as actors, with the park serving as their stage. Exacting standards were introduced: costumed employees were not allowed to break character, for example, while male staff were banned from sporting facial hair. ("I had a beard back then," Renato Franceschelli remembers of his time in the company's imagineering team. "They didn't like that at all, but they let me keep it.") Disney's vision proved a hit with America's Eisenhower-era public, prompting the company to open a second, much larger park in Florida in the early 1970s, after his death. A building boom began as rival operators like Universal Studios followed suit, leaving America dotted with a string of bizarre fantasy environments.

Where the early amusement parks laid claim to a distinctly democratic form of leisure, the contrived spaces of their newer incarnations fascinated and appalled intellectuals, many of them left-wing and European. In the mid 1970s, the Italian author Umberto Eco travelled across America, visiting wax museums and Wild West theme towns along with both Disney parks, writing up his thoughts in an essay

called *'Il Costume Di Casa'* (Faith In Fakes), later translated into English as 'Travels in Hyperreality'. Eco described a world of absurd reproductions that were intended in some sense to be more "real" than those they sought to imitate—fabricated spaces that also claimed a certain type of authenticity, albeit one typically underpinned by clear commercial logic. "The Main Street façades are presented to us as toy houses and invite us to enter them," Eco wrote of the main thoroughfare that ushers visitors into the original Disneyland in California. "But their interior is always a disguised supermarket, where you buy obsessively, believing that you are still playing."

For Eco, Disneyland was the "Sistine Chapel" of a certain kind of American experience, "an allegory of the consumer society, a place of absolute iconism." Similarly high-minded criticism followed from other thinkers too, including the French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, who described the parks as exemplars of what he dubbed "simulacra"—copies of things that were themselves imagined and unreal. Disney's main street is one example: a re-imagination of a certain type of fabled Americana that almost certainly never actually existed, it comes complete with pastiche gas lights and clapboard wooden houses, seemingly stuck in a perpetual turn-of-the century delusion. "Disneyland," Baudrillard wrote gnominically, "is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas

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all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.”

But while the intellectuals warned of the perils of “Disneyfication”, the parks themselves continued to spread, expanding both in their complexity and geography. A mini-industry grew up around their development, from roller-coaster manufacturers to designers specialising in a new generation of indoor rides, the large box-like structures that mark out the world’s leading parks. The capital involved increased: The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, an area at the Universal Studios park in Florida which opened in 2010, cost \$200 million. In recent decades the industry has moved outside the US, first to the UK and continental Europe, then onwards towards fast-growing markets around Asia—first to Japan, then South Korea, and most recently mainland China—where consumers took to them with enthusiasm. Disneyland opened up outside Tokyo in 1983, creating what has since become the world’s third most visited theme park (behind its two American cousins), and a park in Hong Kong followed a little over two decades later. Now both Japan and China host an especially weird panoply of attractions—from Huis Ten Bosch in Nagasaki, which features a faithful reproduction of Holland, complete with mini canals and tulip gardens, to OCT East, a large complex in China’s coastal Shenzhen province that, amongst other things, houses a mock Swiss village.

| THREE |

**A** LARGE RED UNICORN RISES UP on a billboard by the Khalapur toll gate, just before the Mumbai-Pune expressway begins to wind its way up and over the Western Ghats. Turn off, the sign says, and Imagica is just three kilometres away. Getting there involves driving down a surprisingly narrow road that winds past dusty farmland and clapped-out old industrial facilities before arriving at the main car park. From the outside, the attraction appears in part as a building site—the skeleton of its forthcoming hotel and water park visible on land next door, and half a dozen workmen hauling sizeable shrubs out of a red dump truck to smarten up the roadside. The taller rides poke out above the park walls, including a handful of stalk-like blue legs belonging to the half-completed Nitro roller-coaster, which will be India’s largest when it opens up later this year.

In mid-April I had watched Manmohan Shetty stand in front of the lake inside, and give a brief speech during the park’s press launch in the pleasing cool of an early evening. The event was mildly raucous, featuring an appearance by

the park’s mascot, a bumptious red elephant called Tubby, who wears a blue waistcoat and an out-of-proportion gold top hat. But Shetty’s creation took on a more serene look as dusk fell; the surrounding construction work disappeared into darkness, and the park’s fairytale castle lit up against the night in striking yellows and blues. “I had an idea to put up a theme park. But I don’t know how to do a theme park,” Shetty said then, speaking in short, clipped sentences. “We had to build a park that is affordable to Indian families. To the Indian middle class. And we have to prove to them it is worth their time and money. Hence it was a long exercise.”

I walked through the front gate for a second visit roughly a week later, past the sculpture spelling out “IMAGICA!” in 6-foot red letters that stands by the entrance. A few dozen staff in brightly coloured shirts funneled me through X-ray machines and past a shop that was yet to open, with a wolf-and-three-little-pigs motif. I was to meet Shetty, along with his younger daughter Aarti, who had been responsible for much of the project’s creative development, in the park’s main operation centre, which lies out of sight, hidden behind another whimsical facade. On the outside, the building appears to be a series of storybook homes, with a gingerbread house next to a balcony on which Snow White stands next to a brace of dwarfs. But around the back and up a flight of dusty, metal stairs lies a bland, undecorated corporate office, in which dozens of workers sit in anonymous cubicles, monitoring the operations outside.

Shetty hustled into the spartan boardroom, dressed in an expensive-looking deep blue shirt with a distinctive checked collar. He was short and trim, with closely cropped white hair and a shaved head, and spoke tersely, with frequent pauses, like a man with little patience for stupidity. His daughter, by contrast, was bubbly, with layers of corkscrew black curls falling chaotically over a cheery yellow t-shirt. She wore fabric bracelets on both wrists, and a sizable diamond ring on one finger. “We were going to go to America for a holiday, and just before that he said, ‘I want to open a theme park,’” she told me, recalling a moment in late 2008 just after her father had quit Adlabs. “Any place was good for him to go because he doesn’t take any time off, and so it was like a week where we forced him to do that, to take a break, and we talked about it then.”

It was an idea of Manmohan Shetty’s that had gestated since another family trip, to California, more than three decades earlier. “In 1982 I went to Disneyland for the first time,” he explained. “I remember going on the Space Mountain ride, and then going out and getting right back in the line for the second time.” Now, with time on his hands to pursue the notion, he moved himself into a small office in Bandra with his two daughters. Aarti, the younger of the two, had studied film direction at New York University, before returning to Mumbai to work as an assistant director. Pooja Shetty Deora (she married parliamentarian Milind Deora in 2008), the elder and more business-minded, had been an executive in her father’s cinema business. Both sisters went on to work together, taking on roles at Walkwater Media, another of Shetty’s businesses, and eventually co-producing the well-regarded 2010 satire *Tere Bin Laden*.

“We started a production office,” Aarti Shetty explained, “but somehow in the first three weeks of us doing that, my dad quit, and so he joined us in our office. Then he started coming every day, so it became his office.” With their father’s theme park plans emerging around them, both daughters eventually agreed to put their own film plans on hold, and join the park enterprise instead. “When I got out in 2008, I thought I needed to do something new,” Shetty said to me, matter-of-factly. “So I thought why not a theme park?”

Finding land near between Mumbai and Pune was his first task, a choice of location partly forced by the expense of plots nearer Mumbai, but also inspired by a different thought: “People come to these places ... they bring their children. But there is nothing for them to do. Nothing!” he said of the Western Ghats. “I started coming to this area every Saturday and Sunday. You always find somebody who says, ‘We have land, come and see it.’ It is a long process.” It also involved studies to ascertain if the area could indeed sustain such a venture. “The first thing we did was hire PwC in Vienna, which has a division which only looks at theme parks,” he said of the project’s early days. “They gave us a very large report. I paid a lot of money to get that report.”

The results were reassuring: given population demographics, a site along the expressway could support a project with a budget of up to \$920 million. This was much too small to support a full Disney park, but more than three times what Shetty planned to spend. “I didn’t have any investors coming from outside, and I had to borrow money,” he said. It led to a series of strained conversations with bankers, unconvinced of the plans despite his creditable entrepreneurial record. Government permissions were needed for the electricity substation, water pumps and a sewage treatment works. The process was not all drudgery, however. “I went to Orlando, I went to California, to Eurodisney, to Hong Kong and Japan. China, we saw four parks there,” Shetty said of a series of research expeditions, during which he and his daughters visited nearly all of Disney’s properties, along with myriad other parks, some as far afield as Romania.

These visits often turned into expensive shopping trips, especially as Aarti Shetty began seeking inspiration for the park’s largest rides, including its three roller-coasters. During one solo trip to New York in 2011, she recalled, she drove north to a large park, not far from Boston, intent on checking out one ride in particular—The Dark Knight, a Batman-based roller-coaster on the far side of Six Flags New England, built by Bolliger and Mabillard, a Swiss manufacturer. The attraction is “floorless”, meaning that the riders’ legs dangle as they rise up more than 100 feet, before being sent upside down through five stomach-lurching twistabout “inversions”. Aarti went on it again and again. “I kept going back on it, and they kept asking me ‘single rider?’ and I said, ‘Yes, single rider.’” Nine rides later, she was convinced. “I was calling my dad and saying, ‘I think it’s great, I think we should buy it,’ and he said, ‘OK, let’s buy it.’”

Roller-coasters have a special place in the pantheon of theme parks. Their visibility and ability to intimidate make them a symbol of a park’s ambition, almost of its virility. When they arrive, however, they are straightforward to

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install, requiring little adaptation to local tastes. The same is not true for the park’s indoor attractions, the large dark rides that typically provide the most intense and original experiences in modern theme parks. So as the project developed through 2009, the Shettys began to assemble a team of creative staff drawn from Mumbai’s film world to think up ideas. The family’s trips abroad had generated several: there was to be a flying ride and a huge haunted house, while other attractions would be linked to films—Bollywood, not Hollywood—and Hindu mythology. “The civil work, the building, we have done it, we knew we could do it,” Shetty said, as we finished up our conversation in his office. “But the design of the place and the mixture of attractions we should put in, that was the question.”

#### | FOUR |

**MAGICA’S MUMBAI HEADQUARTERS** are on the ninth floor of a business park in Andheri West, nestled in the heart of the city’s film world. Renato Franceschelli’s Honda scooter sat outside amidst the dusty chaos of the street, wedged in next to dozens of others. A sign in the lobby revealed that square-jawed actor Hrithik Roshan shared space in the same building. Franceschelli greeted me with a hug and a big smile outside the elevator, and we walked in past Manmohan Shetty’s office—a spacious affair, separated from the reception by a floor-to-ceiling frosted glass partition, the far side of which is entirely covered with a large colour map of his park. Franceschelli’s workspace is smaller, set off from a bustling open-plan area in which a few dozen fashionably dressed young workers sat around tightly packed desks. Architects’ drawings are tacked to the walls, some showing the entire park in pleasing primary colours, others detailing individual attractions in skeletal black and white. Bundles of tottering files covered every surface, including thick chart books sketching out the park’s features in tiny detail.

Franceschelli’s first trip to India back in October 2009 quickly morphed into something bigger. The team of foreign park consultants brought over to think up ideas for the project didn’t gel, Aarti Shetty recalled, and her father ended up firing most of them—before bringing Franceschelli back in to lead the local team they had begun to build to dream up ideas for individual rides. In late 2010, Franceschelli in turn brought in Attractions International, the Hong Kong-based design consultancy where he is now a director, to create the masterplan of the project.



**Manmohan Shetty with daughter Aarti, who was responsible for much of Imagica's creative development.**

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He eventually moved to Mumbai permanently, living at first in a hotel, then renting an apartment in the northern beachside suburb of Juhu. The next three years were spent pottering across town on his newly purchased two-wheeler to the Andheri office, or travelling back and forth to the park's building site, two hours towards Pune. "He is a great man," he told me of Shetty, during one of our discussions back at the park. "We became like this big family, with Mr Shetty and his daughters all working on the plan too. They kind of adopted me. They said 'You are by yourself,' so I spent a lot of evenings at his house in Juhu," he said, with genuine affection. "I thought immediately, you don't often get such great clients. I've done this for more than 30 years now, and it is very rare that you find a person who gets it, with a vision. So I felt immediately that it was important for me to actually be here."

The colourful diagrams around his office show Imagica to be built around two vaguely circular roadways: an inner path for visitors, and an outer ring road outside, hidden from view. This latter approach is common in theme park design, allowing rides to be accessed and restaurants restocked without disturbing the customers' gaze. The inner circle also allows guests to move from one zone to the next, creating a sense of progression and order in what otherwise might be a chaotic entertainment experience. "It is one of those disciplines they don't teach at school. There is no school of how to make a theme park, there is no faculty

at any university who can tell you how to make entertainment for large masses of people," Franceshelli said, as we sat down to talk. "Lighting, special effects, architecture, interiors, storytelling, theatre, all of these disciplines combined are required to create a park. But most of all you must understand the roots of the people, and how they behave."

About a week earlier, I had discussed some of these tricks of park design with Loraine Fowlow, a professor of architectural history at the University of Calgary. "A theme park is a full-body, full-narrative experience, as opposed to one which is just full of fun things like rides," she explained during a late night phone call. Each zone in an attraction like Disneyworld is self-contained, she said, with its own architecture, building materials, even plants and sounds. No element of the rest of the park, let alone the world outside, is even allowed to be visible. The design has a practical side too. "These places can be a huge logistical nightmare, and simple crowd control is an enormous factor. The design is as much about traffic flow as anything else, and they are masterful at it," Fowlow said. Ultimately the designers aim to combine these practical and fantastical elements, to create an experience which is carefully orchestrated, but also vaguely cinematic. "The early imagineers were all animators, and they took a two-dimensional experience and they brought it out into their designs, to create a three-dimensional experience," she said. "These guys are huge control freaks, but you have to be to do this sort of work."



Imagica's theme, which involves the concept of 'journey', is enhanced by a large wooden ship.

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That same insight fascinated Umberto Eco, when he described Disneyland as a “fantasy world more real than reality, breaking down the wall of the second dimension, creating not a movie, which is illusion, but total theater.” This idea is also the basic objective of Disney’s imagineering division, which is able to deploy substantial resources to achieve the effect, drawing on large teams of designers and technicians that can claim backgrounds in more than a hundred professional disciplines, from animatronics and chemical engineering to software simulation and industrial design.

Renato Franceschelli puts his objectives in blunter terms. “If you forget the parking lot, if you forget the pills, if you forget, ‘Shit, I’ve got a meeting tomorrow!’ If I can make you truly immersed, I have achieved the goal of giving you pure entertainment.” It is an immersion process that begins with the park’s theme, which in Imagica’s case involves the concept of a journey. Its zones are in some sense designed to create a trip around the world: ‘Viva Europa’ is the kid-friendly area, with dinky rides featuring Robin Hood and the Loch Ness Monster, while ‘Americana’ hosts the rollercoasters, along with a burger joint. Even the wooden pirate ship is designed to add to the effect of a voyage.

Balance is another crucial concept in park design, and one of particular concern to Peter Smulders, the managing

**“There is a need for people to participate in things. It is a pure, simple emotion. I don’t always need a mega million attraction to make an event work. People want to watch people.”**

director of Attractions International, and Franceschelli’s partner in the design process. He is cerebral and quiet, with angular designer glasses and a pronounced Dutch accent; a calm northern European foil to Franceschelli’s emotive southern style. He explained the potential tradeoffs as we sat together at the park during my first visit, in the restaurant inside the pirate ship’s keel. “There is a fine balance of how much product you put in the park, and how many people you entertain,” Smulders told me. “These things are expensive, millions of dollars each for the ‘hard’ rides, and you need to have enough of them so people don’t stand too long in a line. But if you put too much money into the rides, and then you don’t have enough visitors, it can be a big problem economically. In China, where we do many projects, a lot of people don’t do their homework, and a lot of parks fail.”

Smulders led the masterplanning of the park, a process that involved figuring out which rides and attractions to put in which positions around the site, and in turn how to remodel the area's land to accommodate them. Manmohan Shetty and his team had plenty of ideas for individual rides; the question was how to join them up. "Then it becomes a big puzzle, in terms of how you put it all together," Smulders said. "You have to plan what people are going to do. You plan where they take breaks, you plan when they stop and eat. You even plan when they go to the toilet."

The park's lake is one example of the quest for balance, and one that Manmohan Shetty admits was a source of considerable disagreement. The design team were adamant: the area around the lake would provide a communal resting area, as well as an aesthetic and psychological break from the hullabaloo of the rides, creating a fundamental part of the park's experience. But building artificial lakes in the middle of rural Maharashtra is expensive, and Shetty said he was initially concerned that the plan was just a wasteful designer's whim. "These guys come up with lots of ideas, but I have to sign the cheques," he told me, although he says he is now pleased with the result.

Back in his office, Franceschelli put the importance of communal space in more human terms, recalling his younger days as a child near Rome. "We had these festivals in the summer, and they had what we called popular games in the local plaza, which could be as simple as running races with a spoon and an egg," he said. "We used to watch movies in public places as well, when a car would come and set up a screen in the square, and you would sit down and watch together in the piazza. There is a need for people to participate in things. It is a pure, simple emotion. I don't always need a mega million attraction to make an event work. People want to watch people." It is a thought reflected in a concept in theme park design known as a "weenie", a phrase most attribute to Walt Disney himself. One story goes that Disney would gravitate towards hot dog carts at public events, and began to use the word to describe any object around which others would gather. For park designers it has come to mean a grand central object around which visitors congregate; Disney's castle is only the most famous example, drawing guests towards it down the park's main street.

Theme park design also involves managing a delicate tension between the fantastical and familiar—creating an experience otherworldly enough to be different, but not so much as to be entirely alienating. So, just as Manmohan Shetty and his daughters travelled around the world to seek inspiration, Franceschelli went off on a series of people-watching visits of his own, journeying around India to visit existing parks, trying to puzzle out what Indian customers would want. "We went to Hyderabad to see Ramoji Film City to see how people like entertainment in India. But I remember the most striking experience was somewhere outside in a park, where there was this water screen with a laser show," he said. "What fascinated me was that the moment they dimmed the light and projected two hearts on the screen, people started clapping. And this told me people here were hungry for a story, in whatever media."



**Park employees dressed as mermaids.** SUDHARAK OLWE FOR THE CARAVAN

All this is borne out most obviously in a series of locally-themed rides in a zone called simply 'India', nestled on the far left hand side of the park, including I For India, a flying experience based loosely on rides like Disney's Soarin' Over California. Here, guests are winched up on seats in front of a large cinema screen, and then "flown" over a film that ranges from the Himalayas to downtown Mumbai, its hydraulics swaying left and right as the helicopter hired to shoot the footage banks this way and that. The result is stunning, although its production was not without difficulty, requiring two years of filming and dozens of bureaucratic wrangles. "We really wanted to shoot in Delhi on Republic Day," Aarti Shetty told me, "but after months and months they just wouldn't allow us." Elsewhere, the park is dotted with other attractions designed to appeal to Indian guests, including Mr India, picked specifically for the film's all-round family appeal, and Wrath of the Gods, in which guests watch actors (pretending to be archaeologists) discover a secret cave filled with angry animatronic deities, collapsing ceilings and fire-breathing goats.

In addition to their creative team, the Shettys had to hire 2000 staff for the park itself, almost none of whom had worked in a comparable attraction before. Sitting in the American-themed burger restaurant next to the Wild West rollercoaster, I talked to one of them, a waiter who asked not to be named, about his experience. He was cheerful and outgoing, in his early twenties, dressed in a red shirt with a nametag and an Imagica baseball cap. He worked in a hotel before, he said, when a friend told him the park was hiring. Now, a bus picks him up close to his home in Navi Mumbai each morning, ready to get to the park a few hours before opening time. The training took three months, he said, and featured instruction on the particular feature or ride on which they were to work. But it involved more general lessons too—in being outgoing and assertive, and how to take responsibility for solving problems identified by guests. The result is on show around the park, as staff lining the

main street offer a smile and a cheerful “How are you today?” and those at the exits of each ride ask, “How was the experience?” There were other quirks too, the server explained. “We were told not to stand too close to people, at least one arm apart,” he said, holding his own arm straight out in front, to indicate an acceptable, Western-level of personal space.

Indian attitudes presented other challenges as well. Most theme parks assume their guests will move around on foot; Disney’s designers even think through the “transition” between each area, for instance, controlling what a visitor will see as they stroll by. But Franceschelli’s trips to other Indian parks convinced him that long journeys on foot in hot Indian weather had to be avoided. “You guys just don’t like to walk,” he told the audience at the park’s launch. A number of tractors and trailers, painted blue and designed to look like trains, now ferry guests around between rides.

Then there was the queuing. “Disneyland is a place of total passivity,” Umberto Eco wrote. “Its visitors must agree to behave like its robots. Access to each attraction is regulated by a maze of metal railings, which discourages individual initiative.” Yet waiting in line also brings a sense of fairness, and one which creates disharmony if some visitors cut ahead in the line, as Imagica’s designers feared their guests would. Physical restrictions were one answer: hard barriers, for instance, rather than rope lines, outside each ride. But endemic queue jumping occurred nonetheless, and after a few chaotic opening days, Aarti Shetty told me, firmer tactics were introduced, as dozens of stern “queue managers” were deployed to enforce discipline.

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**O**NE THURSDAY MORNING at the start of May, Neil Nathwani took a day off from his job at an international bank in Mumbai, packed his two young sons into the car, and drove out of town. Two and a half hours (and one stop at McDonalds) later, they pulled up at the Imagica car park, unsure what to expect. Having paid ₹4200 for a family ticket, they walked through the front gates. “They liked the ride where you go round in a circle in a boat, and you have pump action water pistols which let you squirt people and get wet. That was a big hit,” he said. “They loved the magic tea cups too. All of the rides were pretty much international standard, just the same as you’d see abroad.” The park wasn’t busy, the ride lines were short that day, and the food reasonably priced. “It was ₹20 for a bottle of water, which is pretty much what you pay on the street,” he said.

There were disappointments, however: notably, an absent *Rajasaurus*, the titular attraction at the park’s dinosaur-themed water ride, which was closed for maintenance. “Quite a lot of it wasn’t finished, actually. It’s a bit of an Indian thing to open things too quickly just to get some revenues in, a bit like what they did with Phoenix Mills,” he said, referring to the 2007 opening of Mumbai’s ritziest mall. “I don’t think Disneyland has too much to worry about, but I enjoyed it, and it’s definitely taken Indian

**“We think the park is ready for visitors, and everyone is going to have a great time. But we have also found that customers in Asia tend to be more forgiving than those in the West of things that aren’t quite the finished article yet.”**

theme parks to another level. The kids didn’t want to leave, and they’ve been bugging me to go back.”

Shetty admits that the park opened before it was fully finished, although he does so with a shrug. “My target was actually 12/12/12,” he told me, when we met in his boardroom at the park, “but we could not complete.” When I visited, a number of the most expensive attractions were still unfinished: Deep Space, an indoor rollercoaster inspired by Disney’s Space Mountain, the ride that in turn inspired Shetty back in 1982, was only opened in the middle of June. A handful of other rides, including a space simulator, were junked during the design stage, partly to save money, as the park’s budget was trimmed to keep costs under control. Meanwhile, the owner says relations with his coterie of international ride suppliers have not always been easy, another reason for delays. “I have to get involved with everything,” he told me, admitting that he was still in the midst of a few tense conversations. “As of this morning, there are two attractions still being installed, and these guys [the designers] are saying they need to go back on America on Monday. But I cannot take the risk of them not being here until they start working. This is today. It is going on now.”

Part of the reason for the park’s work-in-progress appearance was also logistical, and in part a consequence of the long lead times needed to purchase international-class theme park attractions, especially the roller-coasters. Nitro, as the Adlabs Dark Knight variant is known, will have cost something in the region of \$10 million when it opens later this year. But while potentially thrilling in operation, it proved agonisingly slow to deliver, given the complex production arrangements of its manufacturers in Switzerland. “The thing is, when you buy a coaster, you have to get in on their schedule,” Aarti Shetty told me, “and their schedules get blocked up for years in advance.”

More than that, however, the park opened its doors when not entirely finished because the designers felt their guests wouldn’t object. “We think the park is ready for visitors, and everyone is going to have a great time,” Peter Smulders explained when I asked him whether it was typical for theme parks to open up before all the rides had been installed. “But we have also found that customers in Asia tend to be more forgiving than those in the West of things that maybe aren’t quite 100 percent the finished article yet.”

For all this, Imagica is up and running, and its early issues are trivial compared to the opening of the park that inspired its creation—Disneyland itself. On an oppressively hot Sunday during the summer of 1955, that park endured a



**The park's centrepiece is a castle designed to provide a focal point around which visitors gather.**

NIRMAN CHOWDHURY FOR THE CARAVAN

surfeit of disasters, beginning with the mass counterfeiting of entrance tickets that allowed thousands of unauthorised visitors to sneak in. “Several of the rides shut down because of overuse, and by the end of the day all the ‘Autopia’ cars had been sidelined. The deck of the river boat *Mark Twain* was awash; too many passengers had climbed aboard,” veteran journalist Bob Thomas remembered later. Walt Disney had supervised the park’s opening down to the very finest details, but still nothing went right. “Refreshment stands quickly ran out of food and ... women’s spiked heels sank into the newly laid asphalt on Main Street. Families waited in long lines to use toilets. A saboteur snipped electrical lines in Fantasyland, bringing all rides to a halt,” Thomas wrote. In short, it was a fiasco, and one now known in Disney lore simply as “black Sunday”.

Having avoided such a start, Imagica still faces a host of tricky longer-term issues. Visitor numbers need to increase steadily—they have been in the region of 3000-4000 a day on weekends so far, the owners say, well below the park’s capacity. Increasing this number means persuading tourists from around India to visit the park, not just those from its two nearby cities. More money will need to be pumped in, too. “These guys need to continually re-invest, to introduce new rides and new attractions,” said Chris Yoshii, the head of the Asia office at Aecom, a planning and architecture consultancy that studies large theme parks. “Lots of parks don’t do that. So in their opening year they do well, but then they decline.” The business model matters too.

“Theme parks are very capital-intensive and have a long pay-back,” Yoshii said. Many dozens of the parks built during China’s recent theme park boom have since closed in the face of financial collapse. Worried about a spate of shoddy operators, Chinese authorities even introduced a nationwide ban on new park construction in 2011.

Shetty seems optimistic this fate can be avoided, and is now spending more of his time away from the park, supervising the building site of the forthcoming water park and hotel next door. He is mulling expansion elsewhere too, with grand thoughts of building parks in as many as eight other regions around the country, starting with an agreement to develop a plot of land outside Hyderabad. The first park he did for love, he explained. “Any others we do, we do purely for the profit.”

On my final trip to the park, Franceschelli and I sat down together at dusk on the upper deck of the pirate ship and watched as the lights around the castle reflected in the lake below. He was in a thoughtful mood, describing his three years in India in loving terms. He plans to stay on, and help Attractions International open a permanent office in Mumbai, he said, to take advantage of what the business thinks will be a mini-boom in other themed attractions. Meanwhile, Manmohan Shetty had done something special. “He created a big milestone for people to match. I know, because I am opening the doors,” Franceschelli said. “It will take anyone else four or five years to even come close to what is here right now. Really, it is an amazing thing.” ■