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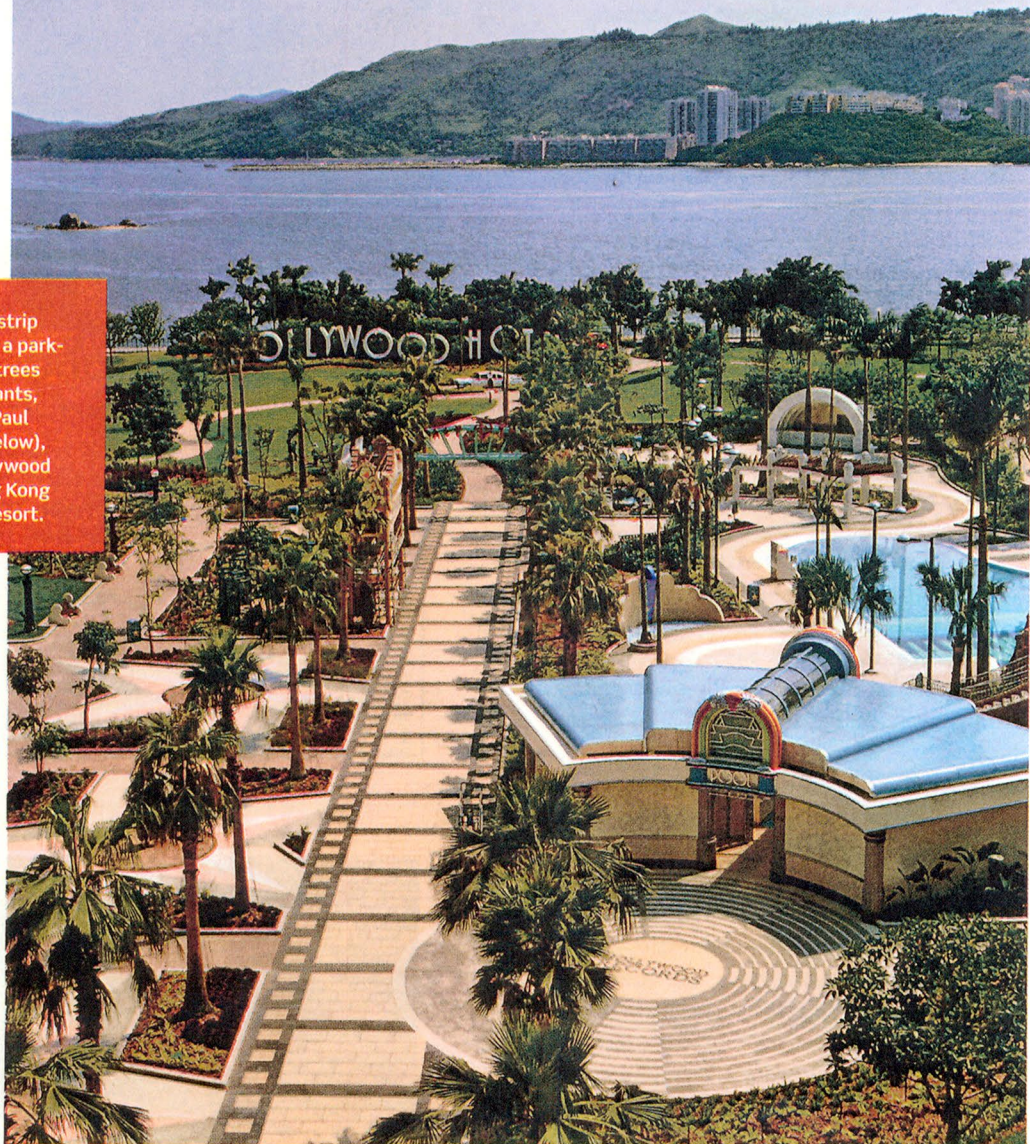
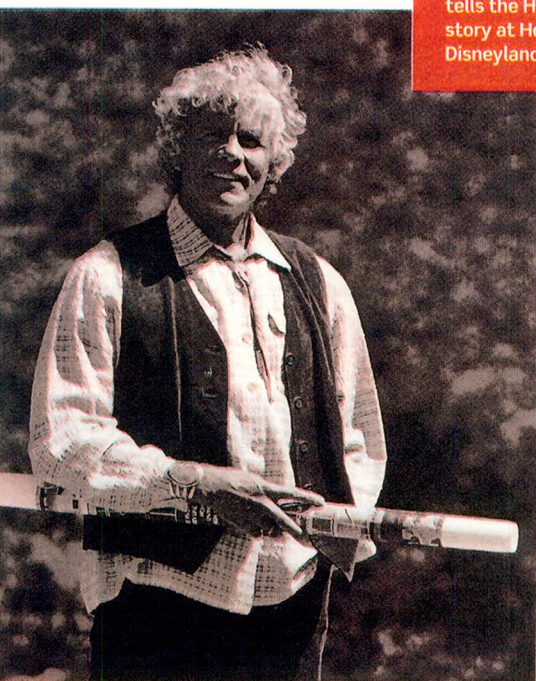
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Right: A film-strip walk through a parkland of palm trees and exotic plants, designed by Paul Comstock (below), tells the Hollywood story at Hong Kong Disneyland Resort.



Designing Disney

Paul Comstock: A magic maker who moves mountains and dreams big

PAUL COMSTOCK DREAMS BIG, PLANS BIG AND designs big. When Michael Eisner, then CEO of the Walt Disney Company, decided that the site of the 350-acre Hong Kong Disneyland Resort be set in the bay of Lantau Island in the South China Sea, Paul had to make the ground before he planted the park. Not a problem. Engineers first filled in the bay with under-sea fill. Then soil-blending mixers worked 24 hours a day for 18 months to combine peat brought in on thousands of railroad cars with washed sand from Chinese rivers and clay

from a ground-up mountain to make the soil.

For the next six years, Paul traveled all over the world, to 23 countries to collect 15,000,000 plants and 350,000 trees. He started 25 nurseries in almost as many countries to propagate and nurture them. In some ways, he admits, it was like playing a sorcerer's apprentice. He was influencing entire economies. But he was just carrying out what he had been told: "Do whatever it takes to get the job done," and "Just be sure it's good." He spent 17 years working for the Walt Disney Company,

designing, planning and installing the landscape for Disney's Animal Kingdom and Walt Disney World near Orlando, Disneyland Resort Paris, the Disneyland Resort in California and Hong Kong Disneyland Resort.

After a brief stab at retirement, he's now back at work commuting from his Malibu beachfront cottage to the Paul Comstock Studio at ValleyCrest Design Group in Calabasas, California, in his (bike- and surfboard-carrying) Land Rover. And he's still tackling big jobs. As he says: "How hard is it to look at a 10-by-10 plot and multiply it by 100?"

Paul's passion for plants began on the hikes he took with his grandmother and his father, a career nurseryman with Monrovia Growers, in the California hills near his home in Glendora. Somehow he found time when not surfing to train as a landscape architect and took on an overload of jobs with just a pickup truck and a few workers. When his father suggested he take a couple weeks off, Paul did something he had never done before — he heeded his Dad's advice. During that break he created a small waterfall garden and gazebo in the Los Angeles County Arboretum & Botanic Garden. Bill Evans, half of

the brother team who designed the original Disneyland for Walt Disney in the 1950s, saw it, liked it and told Paul that if he was interested in doing larger gardens he'd have to get licensed. Once credentialed, he started out working for Joe Linesch, who taught him about detail, line and point of focus. Then he went on to work for more than 20 years with Bill Evans, who was all about the big picture.

Paul's work benefited from both mentors, and he continues to design by Bill Evans' credo: Use common plants in uncommon ways and use uncommon plants in common ways. That came in handy at Disneyland Resort Paris, where he had to re-create nature and capture the essence of a myriad of ecosystems in the rural European countryside.

Paul understood that creating these iconic landscapes was never about reality. It was all about telling the story in every detail. Lighting, sound, the management of space, and the color, texture, even the size of leaves are important to seamlessly carry out a theme. And that theme has to be understood whether it's being viewed from a hotel balcony or from a child's stroller. Around the Hollywood Hotel at the Hong Kong Disneyland Resort, he put a

filmstrip in the sidewalk, designed a Liberace-like grand-piano-shaped pool and added a cloverleaf maze reminiscent of Hollywood freeways. In order to make a Utah-looking environment at Disneyland Resort Paris for European visitors who had never seen anything like it, he approached it like a painting. With help from Imagineering's principal creative executive Marty Sklar, he exaggerated the perspective by putting plants with greener and larger leaves in the foreground close to the ground, and reducing the texture and fading the color by utilizing dwarf Colorado blue spruce in the background.

Paul remains a self-admitted crazy plant hunter. His own wife, Stephanie, confesses to sneaking away while Paul banged on trees in an Australian park to get seeds to fall into his hands. He is always on the lookout for plants that might do really well in California and becomes almost breathless when enthusing over discoveries like the *Mucuna birdwoodiana*: "Butter yellow, huge flowers, great growing on a grand-scaled pergola in Canton or the *Amherstia nobilis* in Myanmar!"

He finds creative ways to move plants — big or small — around the globe. When he



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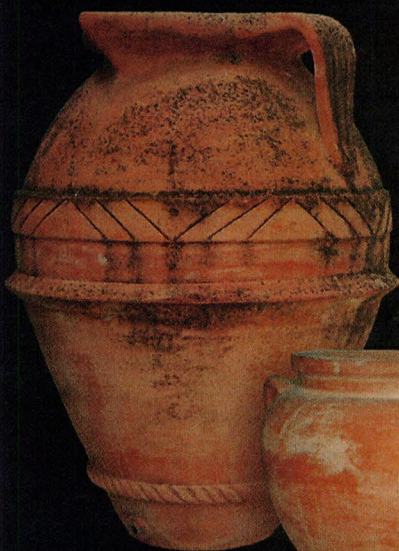


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groundbreaker

found the perfect tree in the middle of a cow pasture in Australia, he said to the cows, "Sorry, dudes, we're taking your tree." They dug it up, cut every leaf off the 40-foot tree to take the stress off the root system, then trucked it and its six-foot-by-six-foot root ball 600 miles. Ninety days later it had leafed out, and a replacement tree had been delivered to the cows. For another project in Hong Kong, he found 70 varieties of trees he wanted in the Caribbean and sent them via FedEx in two-inch pots. Those seedlings are now 25-foot trees!

His private commissions have been equally challenging. A family in Ireland recently hired Paul to design a landscape with an 18-hole golf course at their castle. But there wasn't room, so Paul laid out a par-three, nine-hole course instead. To give them the other nine holes, he proposed submerging railroad cars at strategic points and filling them with landscape plants. By pulling a switch, they would all change direction and the "new" holes would appear!

It's impossible to imagine Paul not being excited about his work. It's equally impossible to imagine him not living up to the standard set out for him by Bill Evans and Walt Disney, "Quality is job one." He'll be doing that in his current projects, which include a landscape design in collaboration with the artist Robert Irwin for the new Renzo Piano addition to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, a complete redo of a swanky Hawaiian resort, a themed botanical environment and luxury resort in the Middle East, and a major sports venue in Southern California.

It's really a shame that those who reap the big rewards of Paul's horticultural knowledge and worldwide trekking don't get a chance to see his "light up a room" smile or experience his joyous charisma. As his former boss at Disney describes it, "Paul radiates passion for living things in the plant world, and the people who care about that world."

Does he worry about the future of that world? Not if we stay attached to the garden, he says. "As long as we teach our children garden design, humanity will have a rosy future."

— **CAROLYN DOEPKE BENNETT**

For more information, e-mail info@paulcomstockstudio.com. Carolyn Doepke Bennett, M.A., is a landscape historian and lecturer living in Los Angeles. She serves on the boards of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, the Los Angeles Arboretum Foundation and the Garden School Foundation.