



Dream Maker



Alumna Barbara Bouza Brings Optimism, Diverse Storytelling to Walt Disney Imagineering

By MELANIE JOHNSON

The concept of Imagineering was born in 1952 out of studio mogul Walt Disney's desire to create a theme park where parents and children could have fun together.

A combination of imagination and engineering, Disney's Imagineers are still at it nearly 70 years later, working to create adventures and attractions at Disney parks and resorts worldwide that wow visitors, making everyone believe that anything is possible.

As president of **Walt Disney Imagineering**, Cal Poly Pomona alumna and architect **Barbara Bouza** leads the team of artists, designers, engineers and others tasked with bringing Disney stories to life. Bouza is the first woman and person of color to lead Imagineering in its history.

"I hope to be a source of inspiration to others," she says. "I want people to look at me and say that if I can do it, anyone else can do it."

Bouza ('85, architecture), joined Imagineering in 2020 as its president of business operations, design and delivery. In late 2021, she was named president, taking the helm from another Cal Poly Pomona alumnus, **Bob Weis** ('80, architecture), who is now a global ambassador for the division.

"I grew up with Disney in Southern California and visiting with my two kids," Bouza says. "It has always been near and dear to my heart. I think of the rich storytelling across countless mediums. It is really enmeshed."

The Santa Maria native previously was the co-managing director and principal at the Los Angeles office of Gensler, the largest architecture and design firm in the world. Some of her notable clients at Gensler included Netflix, City of Hope and the Debbie Allen Dance Academy.

Bouza knew Weis and visited Imagineering's Glendale campus at his invitation in 2019. She and Weis discussed the broad range of projects the company was working on and how Imagineering wanted to position itself for the future. Intrigued by the work and opportunities, Bouza continued talking with the company over several months, initially joining the team leading Imagineering's business operations, design and delivery.

In her current role as president, she oversees a wide variety of marquee projects across Disney's theme parks, cruise line, resorts and more. Her job description might read: Makes dreams come true.

Weis points to Bouza's experience in leading diverse teams and managing large projects on a global scale, while exploring creative design solutions, and her leadership skills as some of the reasons why she was a good fit for Imagineering.

"It's really rewarding to see Barbara shape and guide the future of Imagineering as our president and for me to do all I can to support her and our teams around the world in my new role as global Imagineering ambassador," Weis says. "This partnership has been wonderful to explore, and it all comes down to making sure our Imagineers have the support that they need at every step of the way, connecting with each other and sharing lessons learned and best practices from around the world. Working with Barbara in this way is fantastic, and I'm excited to see where we go from here."



Projects on the Horizon

Bouza says the company is taking on many exciting projects around the world, including two major park transformations underway at **Epcot** at **Walt Disney World** in Florida and **Walt Disney Studio Park** in Paris. Crews in Florida are busy constructing the Guardians of the Galaxy: Cosmic Rewind roller coaster, one of the largest in the world, and an Avengers Campus is being built in Paris. Major projects are underway at parks in Asia also. A Zootopia-themed land is under construction at **Shanghai Disney Resort**, as well as a Frozen-themed land at **Hong Kong Disneyland**, among many other projects worldwide.

In addition, three more cruise ships are planned to join the four already in operation, including the Disney Wish coming this year. Locally, the addition of Mickey and Minnie's Runaway Railway is on track at **Disneyland**.

The focus of the new experiences, Bouza says, will be on creating physically and digitally immersive worlds that bring to life inclusive stories with diverse characters, adding that it's rewarding to see the deep impact the stories have on guests and audiences worldwide, where even the smallest of details matter.

"I love going to one of the parks completely as a guest just to really experience it firsthand," Bouza says. "I love seeing how the cast who work in the park really love what they do. The approach is holistic – how you're treated, how you're helped, how they convey the stories. Every detail is important."

While there are many iconic characters to choose from, Mickey Mouse, the Disney family's senior member and a childhood staple for many, is still her favorite, she says, adding that it's good to see Mickey and Minnie getting an attraction of their own.

"The reason I always say Mickey is because there is something very timeless, classic and just clever about Mickey Mouse," she says. "It is a mouse, and he is so loved, iconic and recognizable."

The progress on projects comes at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered amusement parks, emptied resorts and sidelined cruise ships globally. Disneyland was closed for more than a year, and for Imagineers designing and creating the newest attractions, collaboration became more challenging due to restrictions on travel.

"We faced it head on," Bouza says of the challenges. "When we look at the level of work and the level of creativity that has still been moving forward over just the past year and a half, it is just remarkable. I'm really proud of Imagineers around the world."

Imagineers did what they are known for – making the impossible possible, despite the obstacles, she adds.

"Imagineers are built for anything complex," she says. "A lot of engineers are creating things that have never been done before – like the floating mountains in Pandora – the World of Avatar in Florida or Spider-Man flying 85 feet in the air in Avengers Campus in California."

'Everything Has a Story'

Storytelling is at the core of everything Imagineers do, Bouza says, and the story always comes first.

Whether it is Spider-Man capturing Spider-Bots run amok or Mickey and Minnie going on a fantastical adventure, "everything has a story," she says, with an eye to creating lasting memories and immersive experiences that reach guests on multiple levels.

"It's all about making the best storytelling experience, and I emphasize experience, possible," she says. "How can we innovate? How do we push forward? How do we enchant? How do we design to bring those stories to life?"

At Imagineering, storytelling is a cross-disciplinary and highly collaborative endeavor where

musicians, storytellers, ride engineers, landscape architects and construction managers come together. Bouza's own passion for storytelling began with architecture, in creating spaces that help to illustrate her clients' mission and serve their purpose.

The roots of that go back to her time at Cal Poly Pomona, which Bouza says helped prepare her for her role leading Imagineering. Her husband, **Manuel Bouza** ('85, architecture), is also an architect and they came through the program together.

Building Together

Cal Poly Pomona's emphasis on a cross-disciplinary, collaborative and learn-by-doing approach is what makes the university so special, Bouza says.

Imagineering also relies heavily on bringing diverse disciplines together to tackle multi-layered and complex projects that demand innovation and creativity. Construction, art, music, materials, technology and engineering all play a role in delivering extraordinary experiences for Disney patrons. That requires a reliance on not only Imagineers but also on partnering with engineering, architectural, construction companies and consultants to get projects done.

"You learn that in school," Bouza says. "You don't have to do everything yourself. It's about how do you find key collaborators, how do you grow your expertise, but also recognizing that there is expertise outside that can complement what we do as well."

Bouza's early foundation at Cal Poly Pomona, with its emphasis on experiential learning and teamwork, is something Weis says will serve her well at Imagineering.

"Imagineers are relentless creators and innovators and bringing together diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise comes naturally," he says. "We live the ethos 'learn by doing,' and having a leader like Barbara who knows just how important hands-on experience and collaboration is really adds to her being a strong leader for our global teams."

Imagineering's spirit of collaboration and partnership extends to Cal Poly Pomona. Each year, Imagineers volunteer to work with architecture and landscape architecture students through the university's **Bobby Brooks Memorial Interdisciplinary Design Studio**, a program Weis created to honor alumnus and fellow Imagineer **Bobby Brooks**, who died in 2008.

Students are given a design challenge to solve, and Disney representatives meet with students to provide feedback.

"I had an opportunity to sit on project review and meet with students," Bouza says. "Their work is impressive. It is phenomenal the things students can do – and their creativity."

For architecture, design, engineering, art and

business students who see Bouza's success and want to know how they can emulate it, she says the key is to understand that success is never created alone, and that if someone asks you to take on a role, it means they believe in you. Work must also be human-centered, she adds.

"Whether someone is studying business or architecture, invest time in relationships and building relationships," she says. "You can have all of the technical expertise and talent, but it really doesn't exist without other people."

Imagineers also believe in what is called "the blue-sky approach," she says, meaning that there are no limits when it comes to creation, and a diverse group of dreamers and doers must be at the table.

The Importance of Giving Back

Another principle Bouza holds firm to is the importance of helping those in need and opening doors for others to walk through.

She serves on the board of **ImagineLA**, a nonprofit organization aimed at stopping the cycle of family poverty and homelessness through an innovative peer-to-peer mentorship program that serves both parents and their children.

Bouza also is very involved with the **American Institute of Architects**, working with the group to create the nonprofit **Architecture for Communities Los Angeles**, whose mission is to bring an appreciation for architecture to communities, neighborhoods and schools.

She volunteers for programs focused on advocacy for women and girls, including **Dress for Success** and **Girls, Inc.**

Bouza also has long been active in the Southern California chapter of the **National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA)**, a group that works for justice and equity in communities of color. SoCal NOMA has a summer camp for youth ages 10 to 17 designed to introduce architecture and design as a possible career, as they aren't obvious choices for many.

Cal Poly Pomona architecture students started their own chapter of CPP NOMAS (National Organization of Minority Architecture Students), on campus in 2020, a move Bouza applauds.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

She says Walt Disney Imagineering is focused on creating a culture that is welcoming and inclusive to everyone, for the families they serve and for the staff they employ.

"In recent years, we have put a great emphasis on recruiting and retaining the next generation of Imagineers," she said. "It is really important that since we are a global organization, that we make sure Imagineers reflect the diversity around the world."

Bouza knows how rare she is in her field. African American women make up just 0.4 percent of architects in the United States.

"If you look at that stat, it would be easy to say, 'Why bother? The odds aren't so great.' But I see it as an opportunity, and it is really a reminder to me and a reminder as I talk to students and others that we should not set any self-limitations on ourselves," she says.

"I believe anything is possible. As Imagineers say, we take the impossible and make it possible. And it's important that I am representing everyone. They don't have to look like me. For people of all different backgrounds, it's an opportunity to really build an incredible career. I'm an optimist, and I'm not going to let a statistic or being part of certain demographic be my roadblock."



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