Beyond Equipment-Centered Design: Designing the Family Entertainment Park as a Customer Journey

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Abstract

Family entertainment parks are often planned through an equipment-first sequence: secure a footprint, select attraction categories, place them into zones, and then add circulation, food, seating, party rooms, and branding. This article proposes an alternative experience-architecture approach in which the customer journey is designed before the final equipment mix is fixed. Drawing on customer experience, servicescape, experience-economy, and peak-end research, the paper conceptualizes the park as a sequence of anticipation, arrival, orientation, exploration, activity, challenge, mastery, recovery, social interaction, creation, celebration, memory, and continuation. The central proposition is that zoning describes where functions are located, whereas journey design explains why they are sequenced and how the visitor should feel and act across time. Equipment remains important, but its strategic value depends partly on the role it performs within the larger experience. The article develops implications for emotional rhythm, storytelling, family reconnection, developmental outcomes, and post-visit continuity.

The Limits of Equipment-First Planning

The conventional family entertainment park development process frequently begins with attraction categories. Operators ask how many trampolines, how large the climbing structure should be, where the arcade fits, how many party rooms can be accommodated, and whether a premium attraction can be added. These are necessary decisions, but they are not sufficient to produce a coherent experience. A park can be technically efficient, visually impressive, and still feel fragmented when activities have little relationship to one another and when the family journey is defined largely by empty circulation between equipment.

Customer experience is inherently temporal. It develops before, during, and after consumption, and it includes cognitive, emotional, sensory, social, and behavioral components (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020a). The servicescape also affects how customers interpret and behave within a service environment (Bitner, 1992). For family entertainment parks, this means that arrival, wayfinding, queues, seating, transitions, sightlines, recovery, food, staff encounters, and departure should be treated as designed parts of the product.

The distinction can be summarized simply: zoning asks where activities are located; experience architecture asks what should happen next. A zone map may show an obstacle course beside a café and a party room. A journey model asks whether the family understands where to begin, whether the energy level is appropriate, whether different ages can reconnect, whether the child encounters progressive challenge, whether the parent has opportunities to rest or participate, and what the family remembers at the end.

A Proposed Family Entertainment Journey

A useful conceptual sequence is Anticipation → Arrival → Orientation → Exploration → Activity → Challenge → Mastery → Recovery → Social Connection/Creation → Celebration → Memory → Continuation. The sequence is not intended as a rigid one-way path. Families move differently, children revisit favorite areas, and high-capacity parks require multiple circulation options. Its value is analytical: it forces the design team to consider temporal relationships rather than individual rooms.

Anticipation begins before the family reaches the venue. Website imagery, previous visits, social media, invitations, memberships, children's requests, and upcoming programs shape expectations. Arrival converts that expectation into a physical environment. Orientation determines whether the family feels in control. Exploration encourages discovery rather than immediate exhaustion of the entire offer. Activity produces the core entertainment. Challenge creates opportunities for competence and agency. Mastery makes progress visible. Recovery recognizes that families need changes in intensity. Social connection and creation add shared meaning. Celebration gives achievements a public or family-facing endpoint. Memory determines what remains after the visit, while continuation provides the next reason to return.

This model also helps operators identify gaps. A park may have strong activity but weak anticipation, orientation, recovery, or continuation. A spectacular attraction may generate a peak but be followed by an unpleasant queue or confusing exit. A rich creator experience may exist but be located in a disconnected corner where few families discover it. Journey analysis therefore complements utilization and revenue metrics.

Emotional Rhythm and the Peak-End Problem

Experiences are not remembered as simple averages of every moment. Research on retrospective evaluation demonstrates that particularly intense moments and endings can disproportionately influence how episodes are remembered, a pattern often discussed through the peak-end rule (Kahneman et al., 1993). Event-management research has similarly examined how the sequence of presentations and the quality of endings can affect retrospective evaluation (Godovykh & Hahm, 2020).

For an activity park, the implication is not to engineer one artificial spectacular moment. It is to recognize emotional rhythm. If every zone is loud, bright, and high intensity, the environment can become exhausting rather than exciting. If all activities offer the same level of challenge, the child

may oscillate between boredom and frustration rather than competence. If the visit ends with a difficult checkout, lost shoes, confusion, or a disappointing food interaction, the final moments can undermine an otherwise positive visit.

A coherent journey therefore alternates intensity and function. High-energy physical experiences can be followed by lower-intensity creation, exploration, food, or calm space. Individual activities can be balanced with collaborative moments. Competitive zones can be balanced with family reconnection. The purpose is not uniform tranquility but deliberate variation.

Storytelling as Functional Architecture

Storytelling in family entertainment is often equated with expensive theming, licensed characters, or decorative environments. A more functional definition is useful: a story helps the visitor understand where they are, what they are trying to do, why the activity matters, and what happens next. Under this definition, storytelling can be implemented at very different budgets.

An obstacle course can become a rescue mission. A climbing wall can represent stages of an expedition. A maker station can contribute to a shared future city. A science challenge can produce information used in a later game. A monthly theme can connect entrance displays, workshops, digital missions, the multipurpose hall, and food. These mechanisms create continuity across otherwise unrelated assets.

The same logic applies to child-created stories. A development-rich park can allow children to become authors rather than only participants. They can create characters, missions, games, videos, models, or physical objects that influence later parts of the visit. This supports agency and visible outcomes while preserving entertainment as the primary context.

Designing for Development Without Becoming a Classroom

Experience architecture creates an opportunity to embed development in the journey instead of isolating it in an educational room. Physical activity can require planning and judgment. Exploration can provoke questions. Creation can require imagination and iteration. Group challenges can require communication and negotiation. Presentations can develop confidence. Persistent projects can create long-term mastery. The journey can therefore move from consumption toward participation and authorship.

This principle is consistent with the experience logic articulated in How to Build the Best Activity Park: successful parks require a coherent concept, flow, activity mix, family value, and loyalty strategy rather than a random collection of attractions (Godovykh et al., 2026). It also aligns with the Future Experience sequence Engage → Ask → Think/Imagine → Create → Test → Discuss → Improve → Present → Continue (Future Experience Park, 2026). The sequence should not be copied into every FEC, but it demonstrates how physical, cognitive, creative, and social functions can be connected.

Research Agenda

Experience-journey research in family entertainment should combine spatial, temporal, and emotional data. Traditional surveys collected only at the exit are unlikely to reveal where in the journey problems occurred.

- Use time-stamped observational or consented digital data to map family movement, dwell time, transitions, and repeated backtracking.
- Collect short experience-sampling measures at different moments rather than relying only on one post-visit score.
- Compare child and parent emotional trajectories across the same visit.
- Test whether deliberate recovery and reconnection zones improve total dwell time, satisfaction, and willingness to return.
- Study whether a connected narrative or mission increases cross-zone participation relative to conventional signage alone.
- Examine how the final 10–15 minutes of the visit affect retrospective evaluation and return intentions.

Conclusion

Equipment placement is a component of family entertainment park design, not a substitute for it. A coherent park should be understood as an experience that unfolds over time and across multiple family members. By designing anticipation, orientation, exploration, challenge, recovery, co-creation, celebration, and continuation deliberately, operators can make existing assets more meaningful and create stronger connections among physical play, development, social interaction, and memory. The core managerial shift is from asking where each attraction fits to asking what role each attraction plays in the family journey.

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