



# 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY FLASHBACKS

WE TRACKED DOWN A GUY WHO HELPED  
DESIGN *THAT* CASTLE CAKE

BY RAIN BLANKEN

## THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY CAKE CASTLE.

**S**top. What was your reaction to that opening line and the photos on this page? Was it nostalgic delight or a bit like when the theme to “it’s a small world” is stuck in your head and you have an overwhelming desire to share your *thoughts* with the Sherman brothers?

For guests who visited Walt Disney World in 1996, it’s a divisive topic. Some loved the playfulness of the temporary look while others wrestled with inviting bubbly candy towers into their wedding photos. I tracked down the guy who had the idea to get the entire sweet tale of the 25th anniversary cake castle via an email interview in October of 2021.

And strangely enough, it started in EPCOT ...

### IT WAS ALMOST A SPACESHIP EARTH ICE CREAM PARTY

Over 25 years ago, Mike Conrad was looking up at Spaceship Earth, puzzled at the requirements of his assignment. As a freelance designer, he had been hired by Walt Disney Imagineering to sketch ideas for dressing up the iconic geodesic sphere. The problem? Spaceship Earth was literally untouchable. Conrad couldn’t propose a design that required leaning anything against, painting, or attaching anything to Spaceship Earth. Conrad remembered suggesting at that moment, “Hey, instead of this, why don’t we go to the Magic Kingdom and turn the castle into a big birthday cake? We could make candles out of the spires and stuff like that!”

That’s the moment, folks. Bridezillas of 1996 whose dreams were somehow inexplicably dashed by bobbling candy towers in the background, this is the point in the multiverse you’ll need to access to reap revenge. But the Imagineering department didn’t bite right away, so Conrad actually created a few Spaceship Earth dreams that still live in the ether.

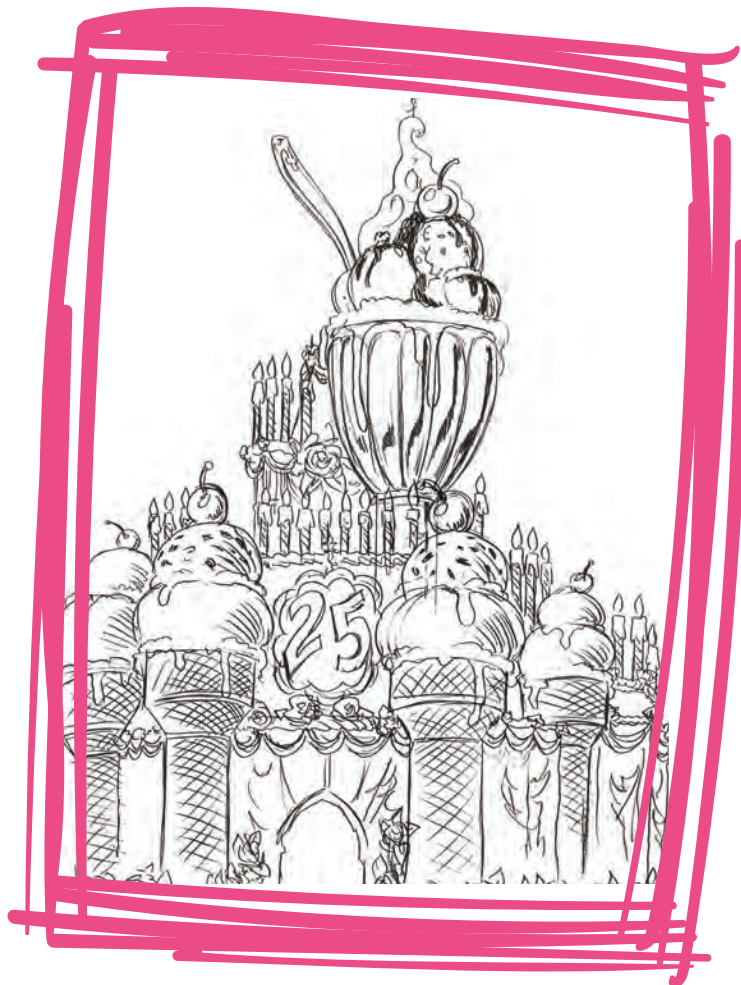
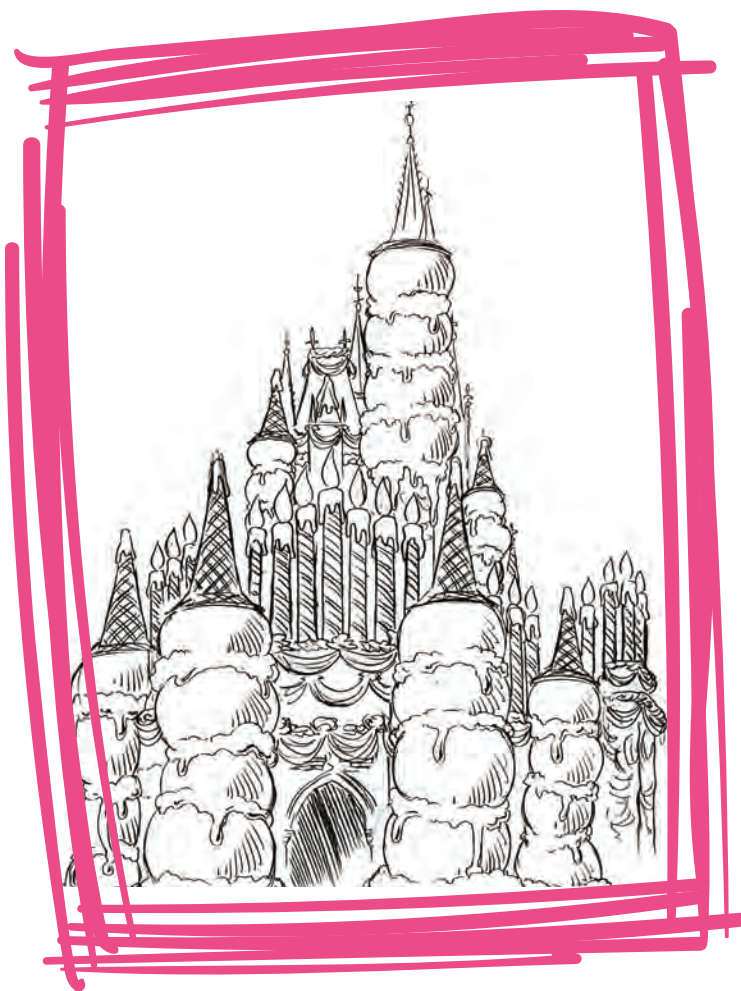
Conrad recalled two Spaceship Earth 25th anniversary designs that never came to be: “First, using some colored lights, we would make the sphere look like a giant party balloon and surround it with some smaller inflatable balloons and glittering letters spelling out the anniversary message. The second idea was to imagine it as a huge scoop of ice cream, again splashed with colored light, and surrounded by a sculpted ring of what would look like half-melted stuff starting to overflow the rim of the bowl. And maybe a big spoon.”

Spaceship Earth would instead wait patiently for the 250-ton Sorcerer Mickey arm installed for the Millennium Celebration. After he was reassigned to Cinderella Castle, Conrad created the first sketches of the cake castle, but also other themes, including *Fantasia* and ice cream sundae motifs.

### BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

Conrad explained the creative process for the early designs: “We were not completely sure that Eisner was against the idea of the cake or just unimpressed with its execution. So, in due diligence, Wayne [Gagne] sat me down in an office to think up a few alternatives. One showed the towers as upturned multi-scoop ice cream cones since the roofs were already cones; another had the cones right-side-up and the main tower turned into an extra-extra-large sundae.”

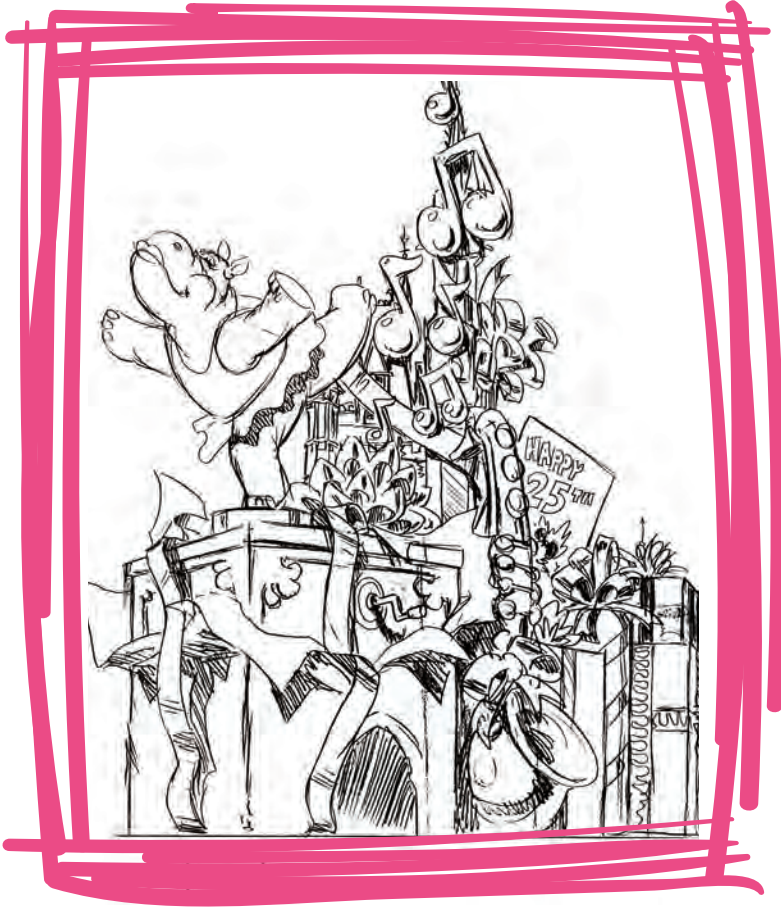
There were also a few ideas centered more on Disney characters. Conrad said, “One featured inflatables of recent characters, like the genie from *Aladdin* and Simba from *The Lion King*. Another



ABOVE: Early concepts for the 25th castle were more ice cream sundae inspired before settling on the birthday cake look.  
PREVIOUS PAGE: Conrad, in front of the finished castle.

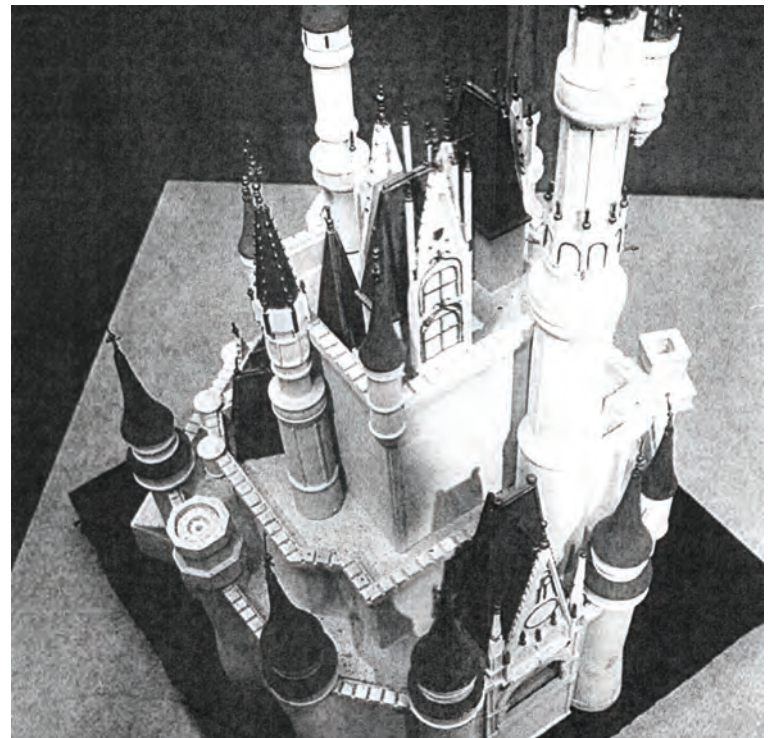
IMAGES COURTESY OF MIKE CONRAD

had a partially unwrapped music box and lots of musical notes on the main tower, which would become a saxophone. Dancing atop the present would be one of the tutu-wearing hippos from *Fantasia*. Another *Fantasia* idea was a scene from 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice,' with Mickey in his magic hat directing titanic splashes of water across the towers of the castle."



"So I was walking into the building one day to meet with Wayne about some project or another, and I passed by a conference room where several easels had been set up with the color sketches of the castle birthday cake concept that I had drawn for Imagineering," Conrad told me. "To be fair, most of the details had been worked out by the highly talented team at WDI (Joe Warren and company), and all they had asked me to do was put it all together in a series of perspectives based on photos of a model of the original castle."

Wayne Gagne, then Entertainment Manager, told Conrad that Michael Eisner had passed on WDI's concept because it wasn't fun enough—it looked too much like a building with icing on it and not enough like a giant cake—so the job had been handed over to Entertainment to take another stab. He asked me if I wanted to be part of the effort. "Are you kidding?" Conrad said. "It was my idea!"



ABOVE: Other concepts included characters from *Fantasia* and unwrapped presents. **IMAGES COURTESY OF MIKE CONRAD**

While these designs are incredibly fanciful and grand, Conrad noted that they were so large that they would be "a tremendous problem to implement." And it turns out, the castle cake idea was already in the Disney zeitgeist. The hive mind of creatives at Walt Disney World, including Ron Logan, thought the castle would translate pretty well into a confectioner's dream. And eventually, Conrad got the call: The Creative Entertainment department had indeed settled on the castle cake idea.



TOP: A scale model of Cinderella Castle for reference. BOTTOM: Mike's concept art based on the scale model. **IMAGES COURTESY OF MIKE CONRAD**

I asked Gagne what his first reaction was to the castle cake design, which he recalls as being Ron Logan's idea, but again, that castle was just begging to be covered in icing, so it was likely a hive mind phenomenon of enthusiasm and ideas once it got rolling.

Gagne said, "My initial reaction to the *project* was dismissive. 'What a silly idea,' I thought. It was only upon reflection I came to realize this was an example of what Walt called a 'weenie.' That thing which draws us in, leads us toward a discovery or some delight. I came to appreciate the idea of having a big birthday cake as that weenie, the centerpiece of the park for the period of the birthday celebration."

Such a high-profile project was a dream come true for Conrad. He recalled, "It was thrilling to know that Eisner had seen my sketches, even if the concept didn't fly. But now I was even more excited to be given another shot to make it happen."

Along the lines of candy and cake, Gagne asked Conrad to come up with a few variations that would keep their imaginations and options open.

Conrad remembered a few of the designs: "One was pretty much the original WDI concept, only more so, with dripping icing, bolder decorations, and lots more candles, while another covered the entire bottom story with a massive round structure like a layer cake, with a great big slice having already been carved out of it. Someone on the team came up with the idea of using candy to decorate the cake, more or less like a gingerbread house. An intern was dispatched to the candy store at Pleasure Island to pick up some samples for inspiration, and we were off and running.

"Some of the sharp conical roofs could be turned into candles, but other towers seemed to call for a different approach," Conrad continued. "So I imagined them as stacks of Oreo cookies, each surmounted by a gumball and a Hershey's Kiss, complete with its flapping flag. There would be thick candy canes for the main tower, candy corn accents, and windows surrounded by Lifesavers of various flavors (and thus colors), all glued together with heavy, colored icing. Also set into the frosted walls were gingerbread men, gumdrops, SweetTarts, and chocolate Sno-Caps, along with a multitude of colored sprinkles. Some of the turrets were to be ringed with lollipops, and in the center of it all would be the familiar wax number candles for '25.'"

And that signature pink? Conrad passed that one off to Gagne. "If I recall correctly, it was Wayne who suggested that the pink frosting, apparently as a way to make it less like the original building, with its gray stone walls and blue roofs. My sketch shows one swath of color through the middle to see how that might look with all the candies in place."



**FACT:** There were actually three different colors of pink on the cake castle.

With the addition of candy décor elements, the design was almost fully baked.  
IMAGE COURTESY OF MIKE CONRAD



With a final concept drawing (LEFT) and an artist concept painting (RIGHT), the design was approved by Michael Eisner. IMAGES COURTESY OF MIKE CONRAD

### GET OFF THE CASTLE!

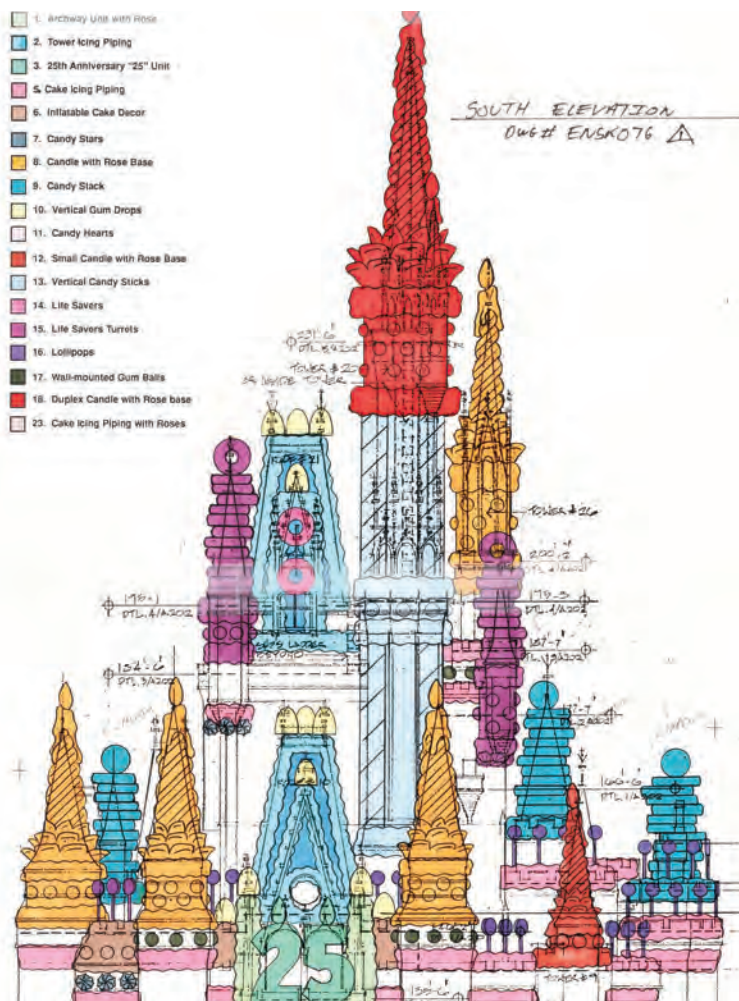
With all the concepts refined, Eisner approved the castle cake construction, and Conrad became the Art Director for the ambitious task of bringing all these sweet dreams into reality. Applying drawing to enormous inflatables and fiberglass sculptures is easier said than done.

One of the challenges was the famous forced perspective of Cinderella Castle. With three levels shrinking in height to make it look taller than 189 feet, the scale of each cake element had to be adjusted accordingly.

Conrad remembered the trouble he ran into while trying to measure each level: "A small team of us went up into the castle one day with measuring tapes and cameras to get a better handle on where the various parts would have to be installed, including what kinds of anchors would be needed to keep them in place. We were almost done when one of the doors flew open and a guy in a necktie stormed out, demanding that we get down off the rooftop immediately. Impressively ignorant of the nuances of the Disney hierarchy, I asked who he was. He replied, 'Al Weiss, President of the Park. And we can't have people climbing around on this thing in full view of the guests!' I humbly admitted that he had a great point, and we all climbed back inside and down the stairs so we wouldn't be destroying the forced-perspective illusion we were all up there to preserve!"

But Conrad had what he needed as a result of his "unauthorized rooftop expedition." After creating scaled drawings of the real-life placement and color of cake elements, it was time to actually bake, er, make the pieces. The cake castle would be constructed of two main elements: fiberglass and inflatables.

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100 MAGICAL ISSUES



Reference drawings to help work out the appropriate size and scale of the décor elements. IMAGE COURTESY OF MIKE CONRAD



ABOVE: A behind-the-scenes look at the production of some of the larger, inflatable design elements. **IMAGES COURTESY OF MIKE CONRAD**

For the inflatable pieces, Conrad sought out the help of Aerostar. As Conrad said, "... who better to fabricate large inflatables than a company that makes hot-air balloons?" Aerostar worked with the schematics to cut and seal together panels of balloon fabric. Big electric fans (kind of like for a bounce house) ran constantly to keep the inflatables upright.

Conrad worked with The Nassal Company to create the painted fiberglass elements, including the rose over the archway, icing pieces, the "25" candle, gumdrops, and lollipops. I had the opportunity to see the fiberglass rose in person in 2021. At the time of publication, it was on display at the Lakeland Antique Mall just west of Walt Disney World. Take in the size of 5'7" Rain standing next to the rose, and then compare it to photos of the cake castle. Forced perspective or not, Cinderella Castle is huge. That's a lot of fiberglass and balloon fabric.

With two different companies working on elements for the same structure, Conrad had the challenge of making sure the colors matched. He flew from Orlando to Sioux Falls with photos of The Nassal Company's work to color match with Aerostar. Conrad remembered thinking, "A perfect replication was impossible to achieve, given the disparity of the materials involved, but at least the colors match; the initial impression is one of a continuous aesthetic."

### **BAKED TO PERFECTION**

Conrad said of the installation period, "Guests didn't see a lot of the installation work because most of it was done at night, although the transition was fairly gradual and construction



This massive rose looks miniscule when adorning Cinderella Castle in some of the photos above. **IMAGE COURTESY OF RAIN BLANKEN**





ABOVE: *Eyes and Ears*, a Disney Cast Member newsletter, featured the Castle Cake makeover on the cover. **IMAGES COURTESY OF MIKE CONRAD**

cranes were left in place when idle during the day.” This left a lot of anticipation for guests who were eager to see the finished cake.

In the days and weeks leading up to the 25th Anniversary Cinderella Castle press conference, Conrad had already been looking at the almost-finished castle. Seeing it finished at the press event was a bit anticlimactic to a guy who had been looking at it for so long. But one part of the event will stick with Conrad forever.

“I did get a big thrill at the opening-day press event when I had the honor of meeting none other than the legendary John Hench, one of Walt’s original team of animators. John’s primary role in this

project, as I understood it, was to choose which shades of pink were going to be used.”

But not everyone was a fan of Hench’s pink hues. Conrad said, “I was surprised to learn how much some people hated the transformation. Some disliked the color, which they often referred to as ‘Pepto-Bismol Pink,’ though I preferred to call it ‘Barbie Pink.’ Others had been looking forward to getting their wedding photos taken in front of the castle and were upset that their dreams had been shattered.”

Gagne said of the guest reactions, “For many, I know it was something new and temporary they just had to come see for themselves. For others, of course, it was an abomination, a desecration of Walt’s original vision of a fairy tale castle as the park’s focal point. I appreciated the creativity Michael brought to the project, as well as the contributions by Gentry Akens [then Creative Director at WDW]. Michael’s and Gentry’s creativity brought Ron Logan’s vision to life.”

And Conrad agreed: “My point of view was that anybody could get a picture in front of the white castle, but only those who were there during a particular 15-month period were lucky enough to get this unique background. Call it the world’s biggest wedding cake!”

### NOSTALGIA WINS IN THE END

Just like shag haircuts and mom jeans, the castle cake has come around. The 1996 Cinderella Castle cake AR filters on Disney’s Genie+ app have recently splashed Instagram feeds with a dash of familiar Barbie Pink. It took about 25 years, but many fans have realized that the temporary castle redesign was all in good fun.

Conrad said, “Recently, as WDW’s 50th anniversary has come upon us, a friend of mine tagged me on an image of Cinderella’s Castle Cake, and the comments were overwhelmingly positive. Some folks even said they felt special to have had their wedding photos taken at that point in time.”

Whether you’re a longtime fan of the castle cake or just coming to terms with it, you have to admit that this labor of love added something special to the history of Magic Kingdom. Imagination and artistry came to life via the careful efforts made by Conrad and the entire team at the Imagineering and Entertainment departments. That level of creativity and commitment is one of the parts of Disney I love the most. The parks are a place of playfulness and fantasy, and dressing up the icons is a cool way for Walt Disney World to give guests a little something to mark the occasion. Gumdrops and all. 🍬



ABOVE: The castle, with its tri-tone pink paint job, before the additional decorations were installed.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Construction is nearly complete on this one-of-a-kind castle. **IMAGES COURTESY OF MIKE CONRAD**

