



The House on the Rock

by Beverly Serrell

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The House on the Rock is a for-profit attraction located in south-central Wisconsin, near Spring Green. It opened to the public in 1960, originally as an architectural curiosity. As more buildings have been added, it has become a 200-acre complex and tourist destination. Attracting half a million visitors a year, mainly between March and October, the House on the Rock advertises itself as “a whole lot more than just a house” and promises awe-inspiring, magical, mystifying experiences. The collections and exhibits on display include the tangible heritage of humanity, ranging from armor, guns and crown jewels to paperweights and the world’s largest carousel. Typical museum functions such as conservation, research, and education are not mentioned in the promotional materials.

Road Trip

Just for fun, I visited the House on the Rock (HOTR) with a group of seven other Chicago-area museum professionals. I’d heard a lot about HOTR and was curious. We drove up on a snowy March day some years ago when southern Wisconsin was still uninvitingly cold. We wanted to visit early in the season to avoid the crowds.

The original House is perched on a 60 ft sandstone rock overlooking a stretch of the Wisconsin River valley. This is where our tour began.

The House itself was not remarkable, and the heavily advertised Infinity Room—a skinny, windowed hallway cantilevered beyond the rock to offer a view through the floor into the valley below (and a cold wind whistling through its poorly insulated panes)—was anticlimactic and not especially “breathtaking” as touted.

But the 16-plus other buildings, located below and behind the rock and filled with eclectic, cluttered collections and re-creations, were almost beyond description, exceeding the other superlatives: “innovative,” “dazzling,” and “colossal.”

Interconnected in a seemingly haphazard array, the rooms were overflowing with stuff. Crammed together were exhibits of musical instruments that played themselves, dolls of all shapes and sizes, the Streets of Yesterday, carved ivory, a huge cannon, an open diorama of a 200-foot octopus wrapped around a whaling ship, and Hannibal crossing the Alps. Visitors could spend the whole day seeing it all—and we did.

Breaking the Rules

HOTR presented a linear, one-way labyrinthine path around sharp corners and through narrow corridors, only to open on wide spaces with amazing vistas, sometimes descending into another room from stairs above. Forget about accessibility for strollers or wheelchairs. The floors were uneven, and the walls, covered with red shag carpeting, weren’t parallel.

Interpretive labels were nonexistent, as were interactive elements, and there was almost no orientation—or warning—as to what was coming next. We surrendered ourselves to the experience. Fortunately, refreshment stops located at strategic intervals offered us opportunities to grab a snack and recuperate before pressing on.

With no documentation, no curatorial voice to reassure us, and no evidence of conservation, the HOTR broke a lot of museum rules. Then why, in the end, did we all agree that we had



World's largest carousel: 20,000 lights but not one horse. The horses are in a separate collection. Photo used by permission from The House on the Rock website http://www.thehouseontherock.com/HOTR_Attraction_PhotoGalleryShow.htm.

a really good time, HOTR delivered a great visitor experience, and, amazingly, we did not have much “museum fatigue”?

Meeting the Owners

That evening we went to a local Spring Green restaurant and discussed and questioned our experience over dinner: Was the HOTR a museum? Why didn't we get tired? Did it matter that many of the things we saw were not real? Why was it so successful? The postcards in the gift shop pictured the exact objects that had most impressed me—how did someone know?

I noticed a woman wearing a red House on the Rock staff T-shirt at the salad buffet. She overheard us talking and stopped to ask if she could answer our questions. We said yes. Where did the stuff come from? Whose idea was it? What had changed over time? She told us that the original director constantly reinvested the money he made, buying collections from private dealers and from museums that went out of business, pursuing whatever appealed to him. Some things were made specifically for the HOTR, like the armor. The director mingled with the crowds, noticing which exhibits people stopped at, where they became most engaged,



A large collection of carved ivory is one example of the fine arts in the Oriental Room. Photo used by permission from The House on the Rock website http://www.thehouseontherock.com/HOTR_Attraction_PhotoGalleryShow.htm.

and what they passed without noticing. Then he tweaked the exhibits, changing them to increase their impact. Daily he received offers from big entertainment companies to buy the place. Before he died, he made sure it went to someone who was “family” and who would continue to run it as he had.



Suits of armor were made for the House on the Rock by the curator and staff of the Tower of London. Photo used by permission from The House on the Rock website http://www.thehouseontherock.com/HOTR_Attraction_PhotoGalleryShow.htm.

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How did the HOTR staffer know so much, enabling her to answer all our questions? “Well,” she told us modestly, “my husband and I own it.” Now that’s what I’d call good customer service.

Why It Worked

Some of the conclusions we came to later that night were:

- Although it contains collections, HOTR was about entertainment and made no pretenses about scholarship. We willingly accepted that.
- The lack of labels actually helped us to feel competent because there were no long texts to make us feel bored or stupid. We were in a large group (most visitors were), which meant that usually someone among us knew something about whatever we were looking at. There was a lot of social sharing of information between peers, friends, families—even between strangers listening in and commenting. We created the exhibit texts for ourselves.
- It was a forced march, but that eliminated the effort of constant decision-making or wondering about what to do next. We didn’t miss anything. Yet we didn’t feel like we had to look at absolutely everything, either (maybe that’s related to the label issue).
- The red-shag-rug wall surfaces contributed to the ambiance in different ways: They were touchable and gave a “cloth-mother” warm feeling; at the same time, there was a bawdiness, like a whorehouse, and a vaguely forbidden aura. No sterile, neutral white walls here.
- The uneven floors—some tilting left or right, ramping up or down—meant that you used more of your leg and back muscles to balance and move than you would on a normal level museum floor. The result was less fatigue.
- Visitor comfort was a priority. We found plenty of places to rest and enjoy a snack. The prices for coffee and cookies at the rest stops were reasonable, too, so you didn’t deprive yourself of some



The crown jewel collection contains replicas. Photo used by permission from The House on the Rock website http://www.thehouseontherock.com/HOTR_Attraction_PhotoGalleryShow.htm.

needed refreshment. The whole place was a good value.

- The current and past owners were constant, vigilant visitors themselves, in touch with the audience. They listened and watched, and they used the information to make improvements in the total experience (and to choose the most popular exhibits to portray on postcards).

Then and Now

The owners also told us that they were aware of complaints from older visitors and families with young children who found the one-way linear path too taxing and “escape-proof.” They were planning to reroute the traffic flow into three loops that would return to a central courtyard where people could rest before tackling another loop or cut their visit short and leave

Since our visit in the 1990s, the HOTR has continued to expand, adding more collections (cars, remote-controlled airplanes, gardens) and an enlarged exhibit that is a tribute to the

“unstoppable genius” of the original owner, Alex Jordan. They have re-routed the single, linear path into three loops. Tokens now included with the price of admission can be used to activate some of the musical instrument exhibits—providing nominal interactivity—or be redeemed in the food areas or in the gift shop (postcards!). A new welcome center, inn, spa, and 27-hole championship golf course entice guests to make an extended visit, and a conference center is available for group meetings. The HOTR Web site sums up their 50-year anniversary offerings as “2010—Attraction, Inn, Resort.”

The House on the Rock is not a museum in the traditional sense, but it’s open to the public and it has collections. It certainly understands its audience, manipulates the exhibit medium expertly, and has clear goals in terms of visitor comfort and surprising, memorable experiences. Its long-lived popularity and self-supporting, constantly expanding and improving facility are the stuff that many museums can only dream of. ✨