

EXHIBIT REVIEW

The Liberty Bell Center, Independence National Historical Park, Sixth Street between Market and Chestnut streets, Philadelphia. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, architects; UJMN [Ueland Junker McCauley Nicholson], exhibit design. Opened: October 2003. Admission: free.

The National Constitution Center, 525 Arch Street, Independence Mall, Philadelphia. Pei Cobb Freed and Partners, architects; Ralph Appelbaum Associates, exhibit design. Opened: July 2003. Admission: \$6 for adults; \$5 for children (12 and under) and seniors (62 and older); \$4 per person for groups of 20 or more people.

Over the past year or so, Independence Mall has undergone what reality-TV producers might call an “extreme makeover.” July 2003 saw the debut of the National Constitution Center, a congressionally chartered but privately operated museum dedicated to the United States’ central document. A few months later, in October 2003, the Liberty Bell was moved from its bicentennial-era pavilion to the National Park Service’s elegant new Liberty Bell Center. Along with the Independence Visitor Center, opened in November 2001, these architectural additions to the mall’s west side have been accompanied by extensive landscaping improvements, new parking facilities, and greatly increased security measures. Independence Mall, in short, has a brand new face.

Yet these changes go far beyond physical reconstruction. To a considerable degree, these new buildings are telling new stories about American history and telling them in new ways. The traditional heroic narrative of the nation’s founding, presented for decades at the various sites within Independence National Historical Park, has gradually grown more complicated and contested, more open to irony or even tragedy. Moreover, that complex narrative has also become more public and participatory, including not just historians and curators but ordinary citizens in the development and presentation of historical exhibits. The new buildings on Independence Mall reflect the ever-growing presence of the “public” in public history and highlight the potential (and the occasional pitfalls) of this more democratic style of exhibition.

The controversy over the Liberty Bell Center (LBC) need not be exhaustively recapped here, in part because *PMHB* readers witnessed the opening volley in that battle: Edward Lawler Jr.’s January 2002 essay on “The President’s House in Philadelphia,” the Market Street residence that served as the executive mansion

for both George Washington and John Adams between 1790 and 1800. Lawler's research showed that the house site had been shamefully neglected. Moreover, he pointed out that the planned LBC would overlap with the footprint of the President's House—in particular, with the section of the house where several of George Washington's slaves had lived. Critics called unsuccessfully for the park service to revise the architectural plans for the new building, and their frustration only increased when they learned that the exhibits that NPS had outlined for the LBC itself would largely repeat the standard tale of the Bell as an unalloyed icon of freedom, paying little attention to its symbolic value for those whose freedom had been denied.

What followed in 2002 and early 2003 was an extraordinary demonstration of the power of public opinion in public history. Academics, elected officials, and African American leaders launched a coordinated campaign, urging NPS both to reconsider the content of the LBC exhibits and to recover the story of the executive mansion and its residents. To a great degree, this campaign worked. In consultation with outside experts and community activists, the park service significantly revised the Bell scripts and commissioned plans to interpret the history of the President's House. While controversies still persist—most notably over the appropriate method of marking the President's House and slave quarters, as well as the funding and construction of a proposed slave memorial—the Liberty Bell Center that finally opened last fall deserves to be evaluated on its own substantial merits.

The Bell's new home marks a welcome improvement over the pavilion that had housed the icon for the past generation. That spare, bland structure had displayed the Bell without context or explanation, save for informal ranger talks that tended to emphasize the Bell's physical characteristics. The red brick and glass LBC provides a far more sophisticated setting, both in its thoughtful introductory exhibition and in its graceful presentation of the Bell itself, neatly silhouetted against Independence Hall. The exhibit layout employs a fairly standard formula, filling twenty large panels with descriptive text, historical quotations, reproduced images, and original artifacts. (The only significant "hands-on" elements are two pairs of demonstration bells, which are proving deafeningly irresistible to younger visitors.) Within that relatively brief space, though, tourists now learn much more about the Bell's rich history.

After an opening section answering the usual questions about casting, ringing, and cracking, the bulk of the exhibit focuses on the Bell's role as both "a symbol of liberties gained and a reminder of liberties denied." Abolitionists get full credit for coining the name "Liberty Bell" and employing the icon in the fight against slavery. Large photographs show suffragettes using a replica Bell to promote women's right to vote. Stories of the Bell's turn-of-the-century tours and cases full of Bell-shaped paraphernalia illustrate how the symbol became increasingly decontextualized, a familiar but free-floating outline only vaguely connected to

its historical origins. In a brief film that neatly recaps and complements the exhibit, one especially effective moment prompts visitors to hear anew Martin Luther King Jr.'s call to "let freedom ring." Even the famous crack becomes less a metallurgical quirk and more a potent representation of liberty's fragility and imperfection. Most of all, by repeatedly referring to the Bell's famous inscription—"Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof"—the LBC subtly reminds visitors that "*all* the inhabitants" of this land have not shared equally in the blessings of liberty.

One does wonder how many tourists and school groups, racing to snap their photos of the Bell and then make their scheduled tours of Independence Hall, will actually stop and study the new exhibit. And considering the controversy over the LBC's construction, it's puzzling that the story of George Washington's slaves gets only a passing mention—though signs at the corner of Sixth and Market promise future "exhibits about the house on this site, the early American Presidency and the free African community in Philadelphia, and a commemoration of the enslaved Africans who lived here." But however and whenever the park service follows up on those promises, it deserves credit for responding forthrightly to public concerns and for fashioning an exhibit that shows exactly why the Bell still excites such passions today.

The National Constitution Center's exhibits were never subjected to the sort of critical public interrogation endured by NPS over the Liberty Bell Center. Instead, the public's role at the NCC comes to the fore during the visitor experience itself. Heavily interactive and high-tech, the Constitution Center is clearly modeled on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum—not surprising, since the two buildings share the same architect and exhibit designer. The NCC visitor's experience begins with a multimedia presentation, "Freedom Rising." Over seventeen minutes, the show quickly sketches the origins of the federal government, noting the shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation and the key debates at the Constitutional Convention (although the long battle over ratification and the Bill of Rights is ignored). It closes with more contemporary images of constitutional struggles and triumphs, leaving visitors to ponder whether "We the People" will continue to preserve our political legacy.

After the show, visitors enter the exhibit proper, which occupies just one long hall circling above the theater. Yet this seemingly limited space is packed with over one hundred multimedia exhibits. Along the outer wall runs a chronological exhibition highlighting scores of key moments in American constitutional history, from *Marbury v. Madison* to the Fugitive Slave Act, from FDR's "court-packing" to Watergate. Visitors can explore these topics through text panels, images, artifacts, audio and video clips, touch-screen quizzes, and reconstructed debates. The amount of accumulated material is astonishing, even overwhelming, and absorbing it all would take hours, even days. Understandably, many visitors, especially schoolchildren, may gravitate toward the series of larger, more thematic displays

that march up the middle of the exhibit gallery. An “American National Tree,” composed of dozens of video screens, offers capsule biographies of individuals who “have influenced our constitutional history, for better and for worse”; a cluster of voting booths gives visitors an opportunity to choose the “greatest” American president; a mock Supreme Court bench allows ordinary folks to try on a robe and “review” several famous cases. While these features are noticeably less “scholarly” than the chronological exhibition, they do help visitors to understand some basic elements of the American governmental system.

Most impressively, at a time when many history museums actively avoid controversial topics, the NCC dives right in, taking on such hot-button issues as flag desecration, immigration restriction, and the place of civil liberties in wartime. In one alcove near the end of the main exhibit, current constitutional debates are summarized on large temporary posters, to which visitors are encouraged to add their own opinions by writing comments on Post-Its. (Recent topics included same-sex marriage and the Pledge of Allegiance.) Unfortunately, a final hall featuring life-size statues of the Constitution’s signers feels rather old-fashioned after all the preceding interactivity. On the whole, though, the NCC effectively shows that the Constitution is a lively, complicated *process*, and not the dry piece of parchment many Americans believe it to be.

The question remains: Will these more “public” sites of public history actually interest the public? For the moment, the jury is still out. Despite its bells and whistles, the NCC is reportedly running nearly 30 percent below its first-year expectations of one million visitors. Meanwhile, at the relatively low-tech LBC, attendance is already up 75 percent when compared with visitor traffic at the old pavilion (although revised security procedures and pedestrian patterns may be partly responsible for this increase). The broader point, though, is that both sites are trying to involve the public more immediately in “history making,” whether as parties to the crafting of exhibits or as participants in their own interactive education. Those trends can only lead to a more engaging history and a more engaged audience—precisely what’s been needed on stodgy old Independence Mall.

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