

EXHIBIT REVIEW

Our House? The President's House at Independence National Historical Park

The President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation. Independence National Historical Park, Market and Sixth streets. Kelly/Maiello Architects and Planners, exhibit design. Opened: December 2010. Admission: free.

CONCEIVED IN CONTENTIOUSNESS and born into some downright hostility, "The President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation," stands as a triumph of persistence. When it opened at the corner of Sixth and Market streets in December 2010, it was a triumph with which no one was really entirely happy.

If you're reading this review, I suspect you have some familiarity with the site's fraught history, but let me review it quickly. After some years of fitful planning, lobbying, and negotiating, the National Park Service, along with city and state officials and local civic leaders in Philadelphia, began a major transformation of Independence National Historical Park (INHP). That transformation included the construction of a new visitor center, the creation of the National Constitution Center, and most recently the opening of the National Museum of American Jewish History.

And it included moving the Liberty Bell out of its small modernist box, designed by the Philadelphia firm Mitchell/Giurgola for the Bicentennial, into a new, much larger (and red-brick) home. Mitchell/Giurgola's small structure put the Liberty Bell in the center of the mall space, directly north of Independence Hall. The new building would run along Sixth Street, putting the Bell off center, but framing better views of Independence Hall, or so the rationale went.

Two events disrupted these plans.

First came the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Then in January 2002 this journal published Philadelphia historian Edward Lawler Jr.'s "The President's House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark."

Lawler's article gave us the most thorough scholarly reconstruction of just where the nation's first "White House" sat and what it might have looked like. Most dramatically, he drew a "conjectural floorplan" identifying the "slave quarters" he believed had been occupied by the enslaved people of African descent George Washington brought with him to Philadelphia from Mount Vernon when he served as president. And if you laid Lawler's plan over the ones for the new Liberty Bell Center, those slave quarters lay virtually underneath the Bell's new front door. The History Channel couldn't have scripted the irony any better.

By 2002, tensions between those in the city who lived with and around INHP and those who ran it were already heading to a boil. In the general hysteria about security after 9/11, the Interior Department, run in the Bush administration by Gayle Norton, overreacted and attempted to turn the Independence Hall/Liberty Bell area into a fortress. It demanded that the street vendors be cleared out, wanted Chestnut Street in front of Independence Hall closed entirely, and at one point floated the idea of linking the Liberty Bell Center with Independence Hall by an underground tunnel.

Philadelphia mayor John Street and others successfully fended off the worst of this nonsense, but by the middle of the last decade the security around Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell had become heavy and onerous. At one point, the security cordons were arranged to exclude the new restroom facilities, which created scenes of desperate parents, having finally made it through the security checks with their small kids, throwing them back over the fences to run to the bathroom. It would have been comic were it not all so absurd. Things have certainly improved at INHP recently, but for several years this international shrine to the principles of liberty and freedom resembled nothing so much as a minimum-security prison.

It was in this context of mutual suspicion, defensiveness, and bad feeling that city leaders, historians, and community activists, pointing to Lawler's research, demanded that the reconfiguration of the Mall include some commemoration of the President's House and a frank reckoning with the issue of slavery.

At first, the National Park Service and the Interior Department balked. At its worst moment, the Interior Department followed the Bush administration pattern of attacking the messenger while denying the message. Its plans were too far along, it didn't have the money, and, if offered, the interpretive material in the new Liberty Bell Center would discuss abolition and slavery at least a little bit. No need for anything more.

Those arguments were probably disingenuous; one way or the other, they missed the point. In his own Bicentennial offering, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, historian Edmund Morgan challenged us to recognize that slavery and freedom were inextricably linked in the founding of the nation. If there were ever one single piece of real estate where that fundamental paradox and contradiction could be illustrated for us all, it is the corner of Sixth and Market streets. And after an eight-year journey, the result of that acknowledgement is "The President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation."

The critics weighed in quickly, and they were not kind. *Philadelphia Inquirer* architecture critic Inga Saffron called the design, by the firm of Kelly/Maiello at a cost of nearly twelve million dollars, "the latest pile of bricks to land on Independence Mall," and complained that the architecture of the exhibit does little work to help visitors figure out exactly what the exhibit is all about (Changing Skyline, Dec. 17, 2010). Writing in the *New York Times*, Edward Rothstein mercilessly complained that the exhibit lacks both "intellectual coherence and emotional power." The "great opportunity" that existed to explore the primal tensions of the nation, in his view, had largely been "squandered" ("Reopening a House That's Still Divided," Dec. 14, 2010). Rothstein wasn't finished. Two weeks later he attacked the exhibit again, pairing it with the traveling exhibit "1001 Inventions," a show about Muslim contributions to science. He denounced both as historically dishonest manifestations of identity politics. Of the President's House exhibit, Rothstein wrote in this second review, "It is not really a reinterpretation of history; it overturns the idea of history, making it subservient to the claims of contemporary identity politics" ("To Each His Own Museum, as Identity Goes on Display," Dec. 28, 2010).

Those comments, harsh as they may be, aren't wrong, but they don't fully acknowledge the unusual genesis of the exhibit and the charged environment that helped to shape it.

Let's step back, or rather step through to evaluate these criticisms and this exhibit. The "pile of bricks" Saffron referred to is designed to suggest an abstracted outline of the house itself, which was demolished in the 1830s. Three oversized window frames and a door frame face out onto the Market Street side of the house. Once inside the house, visitors move from room to room, each denoted by low masonry "walls." There are four "chimney" stacks on which hang four large flat-screen monitors. Rather than evoke one of the grandest houses in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, these make the place feel, at least to me, more like a twenty-first-century McMansion.

While there are three sets of static wall text hanging throughout the house, the monitors are the focal points of what visitors experience. All of them show reenactors playing vignettes (scripts written by Philadelphia novelist Lorene Cary) rather than documentary-style talking heads. One of the monitors features Oney Judge, one of Washington's enslaved servants, telling her story as an old woman. Having been brought to Philadelphia, Judge escaped to New Hampshire, probably with the help of some of Philadelphia's free black community. Another focuses on Washington's favorite chef, Hercules, who also escaped. A third monitor presents us with Richard Allen, Philadelphia's most influential African American during the revolutionary period, and the fourth shows us Washington signing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and Haitian refugees arriving in Philadelphia.

At the far side of the house is a large glass box where visitors can look down at the only piece of the original house—the only original anything, really—on display, part of the foundation of the original house. Next to this, and closest to the entrance to the Liberty Bell Center, is another box, this one closed off to view but with two entrances. As you walk in, you find yourself inside a memorial to the enslaved, and motion sensors trigger a small child's voice. On the walls around you are inscribed the names of West African groups from whom individuals were brought to the New World in bondage.

In fact, my brief description here makes the exhibit sound physically bigger than it really is. Even the largest houses in eighteenth-century Philadelphia were pretty modest by today's standards. The distance between the Market Street entrance to the exhibit and the front door of the Liberty Bell Center is probably about thirty yards.

Part of the problem, then, with the President's House exhibit is one of

ambition. It isn't that there is too much material crammed into too small a space, though that is probably true. More than that, the material itself is enormous: slavery in the midst of freedom; the creation of a new nation and the patterns of governance that would distinguish presidents from kings; to say nothing of the history of the city itself at the end of the eighteenth century, the extraordinary stories of these individuals, and more besides. As an exhibition site, the President's House is too rich with possibilities for its own good.

In this sense, the construction of the exhibit strikes me as shaped not so much by the contemporary identity politics bemoaned by Rothstein, but by the much more quotidian problems that come from work done by committee. Rather than come to a consensus about what the exhibit would, and just as importantly would NOT cover, the oversight committee seems to have simply said "yes." When the call for proposals went out, the committee listed five "cultural values" that needed to be represented: identity, memory, agency, dignity, and truth. Those might be perfectly good therapeutic goals, but they make for a pretty vaporous intellectual rationale. The President's House thus joins a number of other recent historical exhibits and institutions that blur the line between the educational and the therapeutic, between museum and memorial.

The oversight committee asked this small space to do too much. Certainly the memorial box to enslaved Africans seems a particularly clumsy piece of design, tucked as it is almost underneath the roofline of the Liberty Bell Center (which, it should be noted, is no one's idea of great architecture). On the other hand, given the initial intransigence and obstructionism of the Interior Department, we would have no exhibit on this site at all if not for the hard work and mobilization represented by the members of that oversight committee. They forced the issue, they fought the good fight, and they got to exercise a great deal of influence, therefore, on the final result.

The process by which this exhibit came finally to life and the contentiousness that surrounded it take us back to September 11. Beyond any of the details of security or the logistics of life in an age of terrorism lays the fundamental question of who owns this real estate. Technically, of course, the answer is the federal government, and at the end of the day, the feds pay the bills. But from the very founding of INHP after World War II there has been a tension over how this park could coexist in the middle of a busy, bustling urban center. Roughly one million tourists

come to see the Liberty Bell every year; roughly one and a half million Philadelphians live with it every day. Balancing the demands of both is no easy task.

The President's House took that tension to a new level to ask, "who owns the history associated with what is called, and with no exaggeration, 'the most historic square mile' in the United States?" The National Park Service has done an admirable job of preserving, presenting, and interpreting that past over the years. It has made use of its own historians and archival holdings and consulted regularly with professional historians as well. With the President's House, however, we were all reminded that there is a much larger public that cares deeply about the past, feels connected to it, and in this case made its voice matter.

That strikes me as altogether exciting and—given the subject material of this exhibit—thoroughly part of a rich Philadelphia tradition. After all, Philadelphians (okay, Germantowners) were the first Europeans to issue a formal "protest" against slavery in 1688; in the eighteenth century, Philadelphians organized the first antislavery society in the western world; in the nineteenth century Philadelphian William Still compiled the first history of the Underground Railroad; and now a coalition of historians, politicians, civic leaders, and community activists has forced an important acknowledgement of slavery on a federal site.

Perhaps the most surprising part of the resurrection of the President's House came in the summer of 2007 when the site was excavated. While people worried that this dig would be disruptive to the tourist season, the dig itself proved a hit with visitors. Roughly three hundred thousand of them stood on the temporary platform to look down at the archaeologists and to ask questions. Americans, or some of them at any rate, seem eager to talk about slavery. Given the public response in 2007, perhaps "The President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation" will find an appreciative audience, despite its design flaws and its somewhat haphazard display. If nothing else, the exhibit asserts that George Washington held people of African descent in bondage, and he brought nine of them to Philadelphia to serve him even as he grew into his role as the Father of His Country. I visited the exhibit for the first time shortly after some of the good citizens of Charleston, South Carolina, donned their plantation best and held a formal ball to "celebrate" the 150th anniversary of South Carolina secession. The exhibit at Sixth and Market became inadvertently timely and utterly necessary.

In fairness, there is a great deal to be learned at the exhibit, though Rothstein is right that as a whole the President's House feels like someone's cluttered attic. The exhibit is best seen with one of the guide books available across the street at the Visitor Center; let's hope that when tourist season starts they will be available on site too. And perhaps there is a concession to contemporary audiences in the layout of this exhibit. In our digital age, linear narrative has been replaced by the somewhat kaleidoscopic experience of pointing and clicking. Rather than following a story line from beginning to end, this exhibit allows you to surf, for better or worse. Given that it sits directly between the Visitor Center and the entrance to the Liberty Bell Center, most visitors may simply pass through the house, stopping at only one of the monitors or reading just one piece of wall text, rather than settle down for a more leisurely stay.

That said, it may be that the most successful part of the exhibit is the big glass vitrine that frames a piece of the remaining building foundation and enables you to look down onto the past. The glass allows you to look from four sides and see architectural fragments that recede artfully underneath your field of view, suggesting something more, something mysterious, and conveying the sense that this history is literally under your feet. Even on a cold December day, people lingered here, though they only glanced at the wall text or paused briefly in front of the monitors. George Washington really did sleep here. And so did Hercules, Paris, Oney Judge, "Postillion" Joe, Austin, Christopher, Richmond, Moll, and Giles. All under one roof together, a microcosm of the promise of the new nation and the stain of its original sin.

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