

April 2011

The Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas, Nevada

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Recommended Citation

Moor, Angela (2011) "The Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas, Nevada," *Psi Sigma Siren*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/psi_sigma_siren/vol7/iss1/3

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Exhibit Review

“The Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas, NV”


Angela Moor

In 2002, a debate erupted in Nevada over the selling of license plates bearing the likeness of mushroom clouds and received national media attention. The Nevada Test Site Historical Foundation (NTSHF), due to receive a proceed from the sale of each plate in order to fund a museum, ardently supported the mushroom cloud design, claiming the mushroom cloud was an “undeniable icon” of Nevada’s important role in the Cold War; Nevada’s governor ultimately rejected the controversial plates.¹ The NTSHF, despite the loss of revenue from the plates, officially opened the Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas in 2005. The NTSHF, dedicated to the “preserving and interpreting the history of the Nevada Test Site” continues to operate the museum and their views color many of the exhibitions.²

The ticket booth to the museum is a recreation of a Wackenhut (one of the corporate sponsors of the museum) guard station at the Nevada Test Site (NTS) and sets the tone for the visit to the museum. Upon entering, the museum’s statement of purpose welcomes visitors; “The Nevada Test Site played a vital role in the Cold War. Thousands of workers supported these efforts. These are their stories.” The entrance area, a short hallway, continues with large photo panels of mushroom clouds on each side, and at the end of the hallway, a video plays clips of the Nazis and Japanese at the end of World War II, signaling the beginning of the Cold War. These newsreel clips, meant to provide context, offer no interpretation and assume the visitor will understand the relationship of the Cold War and atomic testing to World War II. The first moments inside the Atomic Testing Museum clearly illustrate the point of view of the museum.

The innovative use of interior space inside the Atomic Testing Museum provides a multi-sensory experience to visitors. The design clearly guides visitors through a history of atomic testing. Visitors first encounter the beginning of the Atomic Age with a video clip and text panels explaining nuclear physics and the technology behind atomic bombs. While these offer an important technological history of atomic bombs, the panels contain a great deal of complicated text. The museum offers a glimpse into the Atomic Age by including popular culture artifacts of the 1950s. This exhibit provides visitors with a look back in time, but all 64 of the artifacts are contained in a single case, proving overwhelming to most visitors. A timeline starting in the 1940s moves visitors through the end of the Atomic Age and into the Atmospheric Testing gallery, a much more extensive exhibit.

Atmospheric testing, the detonation of bombs above ground, first began in Nevada in 1951. The museum includes information on the atmospheric tests that took place in Nevada and on islands in the Pacific Ocean. An exhibit dedicated to the information gathered by atmospheric tests related to civil defense recreates a wooden fallout shelter. Another section offers a small amount of local history and tells of the impact of the NTS on 1950s Las Vegas. The pièce de résistance of the entire museum, the Ground Zero theatre, forms the core of the Atmospheric Testing gallery. The Ground Zero theatre, made of concrete with wooden benches inside, recreates the experience of seeing an atmospheric test close up. Following an ominous



countdown, the walls release gusts of air, the seats vibrate, and bright lights simulate the conditions of the bomb detonating. A movie follows with a history of testing in the Nevada desert. The movie includes interviews by past employees at the Nevada Test Site educating visitors on the overwhelming importance and value of atmospheric tests and that they “had no choice to put people at risk” of radioactive fallout because of the grave danger faced by the United States. The Ground Zero theatre undoubtedly provides a powerful experience for visitors, but the clips included clearly cross the line from historical analysis to editorial. Upon exit from the Ground Zero theatre, visitors continue to flow through the museum. Tucked in a corner near the theatre, a small section details the experiences of participants in the tests including participation certificates of spectators and workers. Visitors easily miss this portion, one of the few areas dedicated to the workers at the NTS, and move down into the Underground Testing gallery.

The entrance to the Underground Testing gallery, a ten-foot diameter decoupler, clearly delineates between the two portions of the museum. The gallery focuses heavily on the technology needed to move the tests underground including giant pieces of equipment used to drill through rock in order to detonate bombs far below the Earth’s surface. The gallery recreates the Control point, where technicians controlled the bombs. Nearly all the text panels included in the section contain long quotes by workers followed by a paragraph of information, making it nearly impossible for the average visitor to read the information on underground testing and the Nevada Test Site. The gallery features a model of testing in underground shafts; this miniature recreation offers visitors an easier way to conceptualize the practice of underground testing. Video and sound equipment attempt to tell the story of testing, but are cumbersome and long. One text panel on underground testing discusses the Baneberry accident of 1970, but fails to mention the deaths and subsequent lawsuits. The end of the Underground Testing gallery moves visitors through the termination of the underground testing program and into the Stewards of the Land portion of the museum.

Stewards of the Land surveys the activities at the NTS beyond the testing of atomic bombs. It appears only obliquely related to the museum’s emphasis on atomic testing. It describes activities at the NTS, including an experimental farm by the Environmental Protection Agency, the development of the MX missile, and rocket development. Text labels accompany these exhibits but they are lengthy and printed in small type. Visitors move quickly through the section because it offers little information about atomic testing. The gallery then jumps back in time to explore the early history of the Nevada Test Site area. Visitors, who dutifully began their visit with the timeline in the 1940s, suddenly are presented information about the archaeological and geological aspects of the land. The Native Americans who once inhabited the land also receive attention in a case filled with reproductions of baskets and other tools they would have used. Another case covers the settlement of the West through mining and ranching artifacts. A second part, Stewards of the Land II, continues the confusing story of stewardship at the Nevada Test Site. It contains materials related to radioactive waste, radiation monitors, and waste disposal at the NTS. Stewards of the Land appears confusing, with little continuity between the objects. This entire section of the museum offers no information on how it relates to atomic testing, and for visitors who have already seen the artifacts on atomic testing, merely serves as a path to the exit.


The Atomic Testing Museum attempts to bring the story of nuclear technology current in the final section, Discovery and Innovation. Television screens loop interviews of Test Site employees. One text panel, “The Challenge of Nuclear Peace,” argues for the continued

importance of the NTS as it lists the countries (including Canada) that have the technology to develop nuclear weapons. Just as in the rest of the exhibit, the text is too lengthy and too small for visitors to read. "Today and Tomorrow" offers a glimpse into the future of the Nevada Test Site. A computer monitor plays a video on the importance of continued sub-critical testing. The exhibit ends with artifacts seemingly unrelated to the history of atomic testing; a piece of the Berlin Wall and a large section of the World Trade Center in New York. The museum stressed the importance of the World Trade Center piece saying that it showed that the "test site could help win the new war."³ A text panel connects the Test Site to the current fight against global terrorism with the explanation, "Just as during the Cold War, the Nevada Test Site stands ready to insure the safety and security of the American people."

The Atomic Testing Museum offers a wide range of artifacts from popular culture and ephemera from testing to important technological and weapons developments. The museum tells a number of stories as visitors wind through the museum. Ultimately, though, the museum fails to lose its political position and provide a balanced history of atomic testing. Exhibits continually attempt to indoctrinate visitors on the importance of the Nevada Test Site in the Cold War and the ongoing need for nuclear weapons testing and development. Panels like the "Challenges of Nuclear Peace" and interviews with past workers clearly inform visitors of the museum's position. The creation of the museum by the Nevada Test Site Historical Foundation makes it nearly impossible to avoid such bias. The vision statement of the NTSHF, to "work as responsible stewards of the U.S. defense legacy by conserving the history of the Nevada Test Site and assuring public access by future generations to resources which define the nation's nuclear testing program," captures the difficulties of presenting a balanced position at the Atomic Testing Museum.⁴ The group does not exist to stop the development of nuclear weapons or discuss the costs associated with the Atomic Age, but to create a history of atomic testing in the nation's defense. While this is an appropriate goal for a group, it presents significant problems when it determines interpretation at the museum. Despite a statement in the beginning to tell the stories of the workers at the Nevada Test Site, the museum focuses much on the benefits of atomic testing and the continued need for the Nevada Test Site. The story of workers is limited to snippets about the wonderful contribution NTS employees made to the Cold War. Little attention is paid to the workers who got ill or died as a result of their employment at the Test Site.

Just as the museum subscribes to a particular ideology, it seems equally particular about its audience. The content of many of the exhibits is complicated and difficult to understand. Clearly, the museum does not hope to attract elementary age children. Many of audio-visual elements appeal to young people, but prove hard to navigate for older visitors. The overall content and design of the museum suggests that it is meant to appeal to people who lived through the Cold War. The designs recognizes that many visitors may approach the bomb or atomic testing with ambivalence and attempts to sway visitors to pro-nuclear from the beginning by carefully framing atomic testing as the reason the US never entered into a hot war with the Soviets. In the first moments inside the museum, visitors face text panels, large pictures of mushroom clouds, and a video showing the Nazis in World War II that assure them of the positive role atomic testing played in the Cold War.

The editorial position of the Atomic Testing Museum indicates the high level of involvement by the Nevada Test Site Historical Foundation. Issues of sponsorship also prove complicated as many of the private companies who played a key role in the maintenance and development of the Nevada Test Site sponsor exhibits or galleries inside the museum. Lockheed Martin, REECo, Bechtel, and other companies that had contracts at the Nevada Test Site donated



large amounts of money to the museum. These companies, like the NTSHF, have a clear stake in promoting a positive image of the Nevada Test Site and encouraging support for continued development. The Atomic Testing Museum, through its corporate sponsorships and the invested interest by the NTSHF, presents a one-sided, pro-testing story of America during the Cold War. The museum lacks any real supporting material. Visitors receive a map upon entering, but it only contains one grainy black and white picture. The scant material provided to visitors offers no other sources to challenge visitor's beliefs or concerns. Even in promotional materials, the narrow position of the NTSHF appears.

The interior of Atomic Testing Museum creates a positive experience for visitors. Clear separation between sections and the use of different walling and flooring materials create intimate experiences. Outside companies did nearly all the work in the construction and design of the exhibit. Andre and Knowlton designed the exhibit. Outside audio, visual, and construction companies built it. Considerable effort went into the design and construction of the museum, but an evaluation after the opening would have alerted the designers to some serious issues. Several exhibits use audio, but the audio bleeds into and interrupts other exhibits. Other uses of technology last for several minutes, longer than the attention span of most visitors. The display of artifacts inside the museum ranges from engaging to overwhelming. Some exhibits, like the home bomb shelter engage visitors. Other cases, however, display artifacts on shelves with a numbered guide at the bottom. Some of these cases contain more than eighty artifacts, far too many for the average visitor to hunt for information on artifacts of interest. Many of the other cases have text labels that contain a great deal of information that are too small for most visitors read. Some labels are placed near the floor making it nearly impossible to read them. The large text panels on the wall, designed to look like index cards, also create difficulties for the average visitor. Most contain a quote, usually three or more sentences long, followed by a lengthy explanation of the subject. Even the most exuberant visitor faces fatigue after reading several of these panels. In addition, in some areas titles or panels are placed far up on the wall, well above eye-level for most visitors. The shortcomings of the Atomic Testing Museum illustrate the importance of evaluation of exhibits following completion.

The Atomic Testing Museum presents one side of a very complicated debate on the value of atomic weapons. Most exhibits offer only a cursory study of the artifacts of and ignore any serious discussion about how and why the mushroom cloud became a hotly debated part of American iconography. Other exhibits seem content merely to describe, in highly technical terms, the equipment of atomic testing. Most importantly, the museum lacks any serious discussion on the impact of atomic testing on the "downwinders" in southern Utah and the problems of fallout across the country. These glaring omissions seriously challenge the museum's credibility.

The Atomic Testing Museum attempts to interpret history that has barely ended. The controversy and emotion that surround nuclear weapons remain fresh in many Americans' minds. The museum must walk a careful line when interpreting such recent history. Few other American history museums offer interpretation of the Cold War, and certainly, the Atomic Testing Museum stands as the sole museum dedicated to atomic testing. As years go by, and the memory of the mushroom cloud floating on the Nevada desert fades, the museum may feel more comfortable in providing a balanced narrative on atomic testing. For now, as retired "Cold Warriors" from the Nevada Test Site hold the interpretive keys, the museum offers a narrow, one-sided approach to an important topic in American history.

References:

¹ Ed Vogel, "State rejects special license plate honoring test site," *Las Vegas Review - Journal*. Jun 7, 2002. pg. 1.A

² <http://www.ntshf.org/atmfacts.htm>

³ Keith Rogers, "Trade Center I-Beam Joins Las Vegas Museum: Artifact from September 11 Attacks Part of Permanent Collection," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. January 26, 2010. Pg. 3B.

⁴ <http://www.ntshf.org/philosophy.htm>



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