



A NOVEL IDEA

— By *TODD AARON JENSEN* —

Entrepreneur Jay Walker built his Connecticut home around his “Imaginarium” filled with rare books, moon rocks and a dinosaur skeleton

Photography by
CARYN B. DAVIS





o quote late Pulitzer-Prize-winning author Ray Bradbury, “Without libraries what have we? We have no past and no future.”

Jay Scott Walker, the 60-year-old pioneering inventor/entrepreneur behind outfits like Priceline.com, could not agree more with the *Fahrenheit 451* wordsmith.

About 15 years ago, Walker, who is a named inventor on more than 700 patents, realized he owned more books — including a 900-year-old volume on Chinese apothecary arts (the oldest medical tome known to man) and a 400-year-old, hand-painted celestial atlas — than he did room.

Walker’s Library of the History of Human Imagination holds more than 30,000 rare volumes and impressive oddities, including an original 1957 Russian Sputnik (shown here).

When it came to supersizing his living quarters to accommodate his ever-expanding treasure trove, Walker didn’t merely purchase larger dwellings down the road. Instead, emboldened by fond childhood memories of visiting the innovative workspace/reading room of Thomas Edison and J.P. Morgan, Walker built his dream home from the ground up, a sprawling Tudor in the colonial foothills of Connecticut, with his 3,600-square foot Library of the History of Human Imagination positioned in one wing of the abode.

“I always knew that if I were ever in a position to build my own library, it would be inspired by those two gentlemen,” says the lifelong, avid reader. “So when the time arrived, I already had a very real vision of what I wanted.”

WALKER GLEEFULLY CONCEDES THAT HIS LIBRARY'S PRICELESS INVENTORY IS "RATHER ODD."



Walker's Library of the History of Human Imagination houses some 30,000 rare and nonrare volumes gathered around the world since the early 1980s. That's not to mention the roughly 5,000 singular artifacts and eccentric trouvailles Walker has also curated through the years, a veritable cauldron of curiosities: an original 1957 Russian Sputnik, the world's first space satellite; a chandelier from the 2002 James Bond film *Die Another Day*; a field tool kit for Civil War physicians; a 45-million-year-old complete skeleton of a juvenile raptor; two small rocks from Mars; and one well-worn White House cocktail napkin on which Franklin Delano Roosevelt inked his three-point plan for winning World War II.

Walker gleefully concedes that his library's priceless inventory is "rather odd," comprising a German Wunderkammer, or "cabinet of wonders," more than a conventional collection, preoccupied with, say, first editions or illuminated manuscripts.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: 1957 Russian Sputnik; the crystal ball from *The Wizard of Oz*; a baby-raptor skeleton; a 900-year-old Chinese apothecary arts book; two rocks from Mars

To assist in the project, Walker summoned award-winning architect and interior designer Mark P. Finlay, whose eponymous New England firm has a reputation for merging traditional styles with contemporary techniques, and Clyde Lynds, described by *The New York Times* as "an artist who combines the talents of a sculptor, a painter, an engineer and a magician."

"I didn't want the library to feel like a big room of old books," Walker says. "I wanted it to be like a theater, but not for performance — for engagement."

With Finlay, Walker collaborated for nearly a year to



create a three-level space — part Willy Wonka, part Bruce Wayne — while Lynds was tasked with conceptualizing and implementing an audio-visual scheme.

The transition from Walker's domicile to his shrine to creativity is akin to tumbling down the proverbial rabbit hole, departing, say, the priggish estate of Downton Abbey and landing in Hogwarts.

Walker's wonderland is a mazelike tabernacle bathed in cobalt light. Staircases, modeled on the surreal aesthetics of Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher, descend from the third floor to the ground floor, baring tilework designed by Walker himself, based on a Victorian-era, tumbling block-and-jigsaw puzzle motif. A meadow-facing window, the full height of the library, is anchored by Lynds' pièce de résistance, a 2.5-ton, internally lit sculpture of an enormous open book, the right page featuring representations of the human mind, while the left is marked with symbols and graphics indicating the infinite possibilities of imagination in a vast universe.

Walker holds brainstorming gatherings in his private library to help inspire future ideas and creative initiatives.

Custom-built shelving, display cases and tables cradle pop-art curiosities (a prosthetic hand autographed by the cast of *The Addams Family*), landmark souvenirs (a lunar globe signed by 10 of 12 astronauts to have strolled upon the moon) and rara avises (a 16th-century volume on jousting).

While Walker remains coy on the cost of his unparalleled venture, he concedes that the fixed budget he had set for the project was very quickly exceeded. "I can tell you why there aren't a lot of great private libraries in the world," he laughs. "They're extremely expensive to build!"

Today, Walker routinely holds "invention sessions"—brainstorming gatherings of think-tank colleagues—in his sanctuary, while also occasionally enjoying the sunrise casting new light across the collection he says now owns him more than he owns it. These meditative moments are cherished by a man who still believes that everything is possible or, as Walker says, "What haven't we imagined yet?" **CL**