

A Regal Residence

For Howard Solomon, his home truly is his castle



Above: Visitors wait for a tour of Solomon's Castle to begin. Inset: Two suits of armor guard the front entrance to the castle; one is painted white, one black.

by Beth Luberecki

Driving on C.R. 665 in Hardee County, one passes herds of cows grazing in pastures, groves of citrus trees, and farmhouses situated on wide swaths of open land. The last thing one would expect to see in these parts is a castle. Castles belong in Europe, or at least in Orlando. But take a turn down Solomon Road and drive to the end, and sure enough there sits a castle.

Built by artist and author Howard Solomon, Solomon's Castle is a different breed from its European cousins. For starters, the gleaming silver exterior of this castle is made from discarded aluminum printing plates. There are no thrones, tapestries, or heraldic coats of arms inside, but rather an impressive col-

lection of fanciful metal sculptures and wood carvings.

Yet it does have some typical castle accoutrements. There are towers and turrets and even a fierce-looking creature standing guard outside the castle. "We call him Igor the castle dragon," says Solomon of the eighteen-year-old, macaroni-and-cheese-loving iguana in a cage along the path to the entrance. Two suits of armor flanking the front door further add to the fortified feel; Solomon found them in a junk pile, restored them, and painted one black, one white.

Solomon has been building his castle in Ona, Florida, since 1972. Situated on ninety acres of land and open to the public for tours, it provides him with an unconventional place to showcase his equally unconventional creations. "I

PHOTOS BY BETH LUBERECKI

work with used materials,” Solomon says. “My pieces are made of things people throw away.” That includes oil drums, gas tanks, exhaust pipes, and bits from various machines and appliances.

Each room of the castle reveals the fruits of Solomon’s wild imagination. There’s a mounted grouper made from beer-can bottoms, a lion formed from five oil drums, and a number of pieces created during Solomon’s “Brake Shoe Period.” A metal helicopter hanging from the ceiling features a cockpit made from a peanut butter jar. Fifty pounds of wire coat hangers have been transformed into an animal menagerie, while hundreds of wood scraps and shavings were used to construct wall hangings depicting a Bahamian village and the city of Barcelona. Solomon’s “gun” collection includes “weapons” made from a water-pump handle, toilet valve (“for flushing out the perpetrator”), and pipe wrench.

It’s clear that Solomon has a great sense of humor, and he has a story and a joke at the ready for each of his pieces and displays. Of a chair made from eighty-six beer cans, he says, “I was trying to drink one hundred fifty cans, because I wanted a couch.” He calls an

alligator crafted from an oil drum Samsonite, because “his mother was luggage.” In his living quarters, a camera collection exhibited on a windowsill is his “picture window.” He classifies the



Above: A replica Spanish galleon serves as the site’s Boat in the Moat Restaurant. **Inset:** Solomon must be a fan of the *Where’s Waldo?* books, because Waldo shows up in several of his pieces.



site. When finished, it will offer six rooms, each decorated in a different theme. And in keeping with Solomon’s practice of recycling and reusing, the inn’s doors and

windows came from a salvage yard in St. Petersburg.

Creatively, Solomon shows no signs of slowing down. His studio contains every tool imaginable, some of which, like an 1895 vice from Kansas City, Missouri, are older than he is. (The father of five and grandfather of three turns seventy-one in May.) A number of works in progress sit on tables or behind sheets, like his wooden recreations of paintings by Modigliani. (Recreating works by modern masters like Picasso and Calder is one of Solomon’s

newest endeavors.) “The ideas aren’t any problem,” he says. “It’s the hours in a day, that’s a problem.”

Yet his castle has officially been on the market for about fifteen years (with a seven-figure asking price), and he says he’d willingly sell if given the opportunity. Luckily for interested visitors, no one has made any moves to purchase the property, though Solomon thinks it would make a great place for a medieval fair.

But in the meantime, he’ll keep working and opening his home for tours, allowing others a glimpse into his unique world. “It’s just the way I was born,” he says of his urge to create. “I started making things when I was four. During the Depression, we didn’t have a lot of toys. Kids made their own toys. So, I’m still making my own toys.” 🦋

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If You Go

Solomon’s Castle is located at 4533 Solomon Road in Ona, Florida. To get there, take Interstate 75 north to U.S. 17 north to Route 70 west. Then take C.R. 661 north to C.R. 665 west. Solomon Road is off of C.R. 665.

The castle is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. It is closed during the months of July, August, and September. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$4 for children twelve and under. The tour of the property takes about thirty minutes. For more information, call 863-494-6077.