

Dinosaurs of rock

Dude! The Hayden Planetarium's laser shows could be playing their final days



3-D-light: Say goodbye to this cool guy.

The sky tilts and starts to spin. Stars slide and disappear over the horizon as the glowing red image of a man in a chair tumbles and recedes. Vertigo takes hold and the audience screams like a busload of people going over a cliff. In a city where everything changes, the Hayden Planetarium's laser shows have long had a reassuring constancy.

Crowds first gathered beneath the planetarium's domed ceiling, slipping into subconsciousness to the strains of Led Zeppelin's power chords, in 1974. Twenty-two years later, visitors can still hear the megalithic rock of Pink Floyd while their retinas are assaulted by the latest in laser technology. Not even *Cats* can claim this kind of staying power. But in January, *Lasereality*, now in 3-D, will come to an end when the American Museum of Natural History closes its planetarium annex for demolition.

Despite the protests of several preservation groups and the neighbors across the way on West 81st Street, the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission approved the tearing down of the Hayden last year. The 61-year-old building will be replaced with an ambitious structure that will include a restaurant, a three-level parking lot and a new Sky Theater, a 90-foot-diameter sphere that will house the new planetarium. It is as-

sumed that the laser shows will return when the new planetarium opens, but that is expected to take at least three years. Construction is slated to start in March. "We're looking into other theaters in the museum for the light show," says museum spokesperson Elizabeth Chapman, "but I'm not sure that will be resolved before January."

So where does this leave *Lasereality* devotees, a slightly more urbane but no less obsessed species of Deadhead? Some visitors to the *Dark Side of the Moon* show one recent Saturday night were surprised to learn that the planetarium would be razed. Rob Sussman, 40, has seen the Floyd show several times before, and went to see his first laser show, *Laser Zeppelin*, ten or 15 years ago. "They're tearing this building down?" he asked incredulously. Asked what the appeal of the laser shows was, he said, "Just the building itself—I was always fascinated. And it's made a quantum leap with the 3-D."

"It's just a different experience: It's not a movie; it's not a concert," said Rob Sparkes, the Hayden Planetarium's chief laserist for the past 13 years. "What you're trying to accomplish is a *synaesthetic* experience. You don't really have a language for that. It can put you in a different state of mind."

The crowd filing out of the darkened cathedral of rock did look a little stunned. Young families with kids in tow, gloms of dating teenagers and a handful of Italian tourists emerged blinking and glassy-eyed. Three teenagers, two boys and a girl, each about 16 years old, paused in the Hayden's lobby.

"I liked how it felt like you were moving," one of the boys said.

"Yeah," said the other boy. "I finally got the message of the whole CD."

The girl, wearing a leather jacket and a silver nose stud, tucked a strand of jet-black hair behind her ear as she struggled for words to describe the laser show's lasting effects. Finally, she settled for a tried-and-true comparison that, like the Hayden itself, has served the laser show in good stead since the '70s.

"It was better than acid," she said.

—Rob Cummings
The Hayden Planetarium's laser shows take place on Friday and Saturday nights until January. See Museums for details.

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