



## Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

### Architecture review: Madame Tussauds in Hollywood

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For an architect, designing a tourist attraction can be a thankless task. Almost by definition, your target audience is jet-lagged, searching for a place to have a cigarette, thinking about where to go for dinner, nursing a sunburn or a hangover (or both) or chasing a wayward toddler -- destined, in other words, to pay attention to everything but the architecture.

Michael Rotondi and John Ash, lead architects of the new Hollywood branch of Madame Tussauds wax museum, which opened Aug. 1, understand the challenge of playing to that distracted crowd as well as anyone. The other day, as Rotondi was giving me a tour of the building, which he said cost \$25 million to build, with another \$25 million for the high-gloss, tomato-red interiors (by designers from Madame Tussauds and J.R. Miller & Associates), he was rather enthusiastically interrupted by a pair of young women. I thought for the briefest moment that they recognized him.

But it soon became clear that they didn't want to ask him about the design of the museum, which anchors the northeast corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Orange Drive. Or about his role as director of the Southern California Institute of Architecture in the 1980s and 1990s. Or about his work in the firm Morphosis, which he founded with Thom Mayne in 1975. Or his decision to leave the partnership in 1991, only to see Mayne go on to worldwide fame.

He should be so lucky. What the pair wanted was for him to snap a picture of them posing with the Justin Timberlake statue -- which, agreeably, he proceeded to do.

Though most visitors probably won't notice -- especially if they're from out of town, and rushing

through the building in search of Barack Obama or David Beckham -- the wax museum, as a piece of new Hollywood architecture, actually presents a number of compelling questions. These have less to do with the relationship between tourism and cities, ultimately, and more to do with the experiment in pedestrian-centered density now being carried out in a growing slice of Hollywood. More broadly, the building is an example of the way in which Rotondi, 60, and other architects of his generation are working to adapt their rebellious, idiosyncratic approach to an L.A. region that is very different from the one in which they worked when they were starting out.

The wax museum is an attempt by an architect known for sharp-elbowed, go-it-alone buildings to knit one of his designs into an increasingly crowded urban fabric. It is iconoclasm as infill.

The Madame Tussauds building sits on one end of what in recent years has arguably become the busiest pedestrian thoroughfare in Los Angeles, save perhaps CityWalk at Universal Studios. To get from the corner of Hollywood and Highland to the wax museum's front entrance requires threading your way through a dense crowd of shoppers; tourists in front of the Kodak Theatre; commuters emerging from the mouth of the Red Line station; Storm Troopers and celebrity lookalikes in front of Grauman's Chinese Theatre; and, lately, Michael Jackson fans posing for pictures in front of the late singer's star, which happens to sit

within a few feet of the Grauman's box office.

Amid that cacophony, the wax museum design, at least initially, seems plenty loud itself. Rotondi, in his work with Mayne and on his own, leading the firm RoTo Architects, is by now well practiced in employing the colliding or piled-up forms, deliberately rough finishes and workaday materials long associated with the group of Southern California architects known as the L.A. School.



For Madame Tussauds, he and Ash have created a three-story collection of angled, folded and puckered planes sheathed in glass, dark-gray cement block, naked concrete and, most prominently, a skin of overlapping zinc panels. The building is essentially U-shaped in plan, wrapping around a plaza that opens onto Hollywood Boulevard. The façade, particularly as it faces south toward the sidewalk, is crawling with metal protuberances, including an open-air staircase, a pair of terraces and, attached to the roof, a sail-like sunshade that is as much aggressively decorative as functional.



The overall effect has much of the ad-hoc, thrown-together appeal of the best-known L.A. School products. The building is a distant cousin, to pick one example, of a 1990 branch of Kentucky Fried Chicken on Western Avenue by Jeffrey Daniels, an alumnus of Frank Gehry's office. It has an inherent playfulness and theatricality that suits its site and its occupant but also seems mannered in that busily impermanent, heavy-metal L.A. School way.

In that sense, there is something both charismatic and undeniably dated about the design, perhaps because the building, imagined originally as a spec project, has been in the works since the mid-1990s. Rotondi signed on after an earlier design for the site by architect John Ash was criticized by some property owners and others in the area. A new version, with Rotondi adding his signature approach to Ash's earlier blueprint, was published in the Times a decade ago but then sat for years on the shelf before Madame Tussauds signed on to fill the building in 2005.

In the end, as is so often the case with architecture of all kinds, those delays gave the architects a chance to hone and improve the design. To begin with, they changed much of the glass on the façade to more opaque zinc panels and cement block, to suit Madame Tussauds' desire for windowless galleries. (The inside is so windowless, in fact, that it is almost impossible to get your bearings or figure out which wing of the building you're in; the museum's layout and its employees funnel visitors through a series of statue-filled rooms with nearly the same precision that sends tourists through rides at Disneyland.) There remains a large, glass-box commercial space on the eastern end of the building that is not part of the wax museum and awaits its first tenant.



More significant, as Rotondi and Ash reworked the design they made the building more public-minded and slightly less enamored with itself. They enlarged the plaza at the center of the building as well as the staircase, which serves as a place for the many tourists thronging the block to rest, making a mass of people the building's most unmistakable piece of ornament. The result is a well-proportioned outdoor space fully open to the sidewalk and guaranteed, simply by its location, to be full of people nearly every day of the year.

As the architects waited for the project to break ground, the neighborhood changed even more dramatically than their design did. A subway stop was added a half-block away. Hollywood attracted a huge wave of new construction, producing a level of density that is alarming to some longtime residents of the area but has also filled many of its sidewalks, even some far from the epicenter of the tourist business, with pedestrians.

Into that loud, busy, proudly crass and thoroughly commercial urban setting – which is at once an anomaly in still car-centric Los Angeles but also, as the region densifies, a sign of things to come – Rotondi and Ash have inserted a piece of architecture that very much wants to be liked. If it also seems rather conflicted – a background building and a foreground building at the same time – that likely says as much about Los Angeles, at this uncertain stage in its urban development as it does about the architect.

In a profile published in the Times in 1988, Rotondi called Los Angeles "a giant laboratory." Early projects by Morphosis, crackling with ideas but also ungainly as urban objects, reflected that idea. But the city no longer fits that description: It is less a place for experimental architecture and more a metropolis trying in fits and starts to accept and adapt to middle age. The hybrid spaces of the city, as a result – the borders where open meets closed or staged runs up against unplanned – are the real locus of architectural opportunity now, rendering form-making for its own sake, however inventive, increasingly irrelevant. In somewhat surprising ways, the wax museum building understands -- and does its best to acknowledge -- these shifts.

-- Christopher Hawthorne

*Photos: Madam Tussaud's wax museum in Hollywood. Credit: Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times*

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