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CRIT> MADAME TUSSAUDS HOLLYWOOD

Michael Rotondi's new home for the waxworks emporium makes a surprisingly public statement

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BECAUSE IT ONLY OCCUPIES HALF THE ALLOWABLE SPACE, THE NEW MADAME TUSSAUDS HAS PLENTY OF ROOF FOR AN AMPLE PUBLIC PLAZA.

DORI THIES

RoTo Architects and the John Ash Group have broken new ground in Hollywood. The courtyard building they have just completed on a corner site adjoining the Chinese Theater may be the first piece of architecture on Hollywood Boulevard to look forward as well as back. RoTo principal Michael Rotondi grew up in LA and remembers coming here as a kid to catch a movie and hang out with friends. He wanted to recreate the feeling of sociability and spectacle he enjoyed then by designing a building that was contemporary in expression but deeply rooted in tradition and place.

Happily, the owners of the site shared his vision. Larry Worchell and Steve Ullman have long had a stake in Hollywood and wanted to do the right thing. They asked RoTo to give them a signature building that would occupy only half the maximum allowable volume. In contrast to the overwhelming bulk and blank street facades of the Hollywood and Highland mall to the east, the new building is modestly scaled, and its two three-story wings frame a sizeable plaza. This public space picks up on the tradition of the Chinese and Egyptian theaters, set back behind forecourts that would serve as gathering places before a show or to accommodate a crowd for a gala premiere.

The owners stayed the course for ten years as the first anchor tenant (the now bankrupt Frederick's of Hollywood) dropped out, and Madame Tussauds took the principal space. One can debate whether waxworks are a classier attraction than sexy lingerie, but the eponymous madame established herself in London 220 years ago, and celebrity replicas have enduring appeal, particularly in a surreal place like Hollywood. Movie stars shopped and dined on Hollywood Boulevard during its brief heyday; today's tourists must make do with look-alikes.

The architects had to negotiate a jungle of regulations—from the gauge of handrails to street openings—while maintaining the integrity of their design. Hollywood Heritage (a bunch of nostalgia buffs who seek to preserve the past and favor historical pastiches) tried to derail the project, as they had with Hodgetts +



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Fung's recreation of the decrepit Hollywood Bowl. Miraculously, most essentials of the design remained unchanged, though a pedestrian arcade linking front and back was sacrificed to provide more enclosed space.

Frederick's had wanted to put its wares on view. Tussauds preferred solid walls to achieve a controlled environment, though visitors enter through roll-up glass doors, and a lofty retail space to the east is fully glazed. The solid walls are clad in gray-brown zinc scales with projecting fins to create a play of shadows, and a folded screen of perforated metal spans the height difference between the two wings, tying the composition together. The main wing is tapered in plan, and clad in bowed walls of dark brick on the Orange Avenue frontage. Rotondi's invention and Ash's expertise in preservation fused to create a subtly modeled structure that is neutral yet has presence.

"This building is about movement," said Rotondi, and he has provided visitors with exciting new vistas. A staircase runs up the east side and the rear wall to an overlook, and a catwalk links a rooftop party space in back to a terrace looking over the boulevard. From both these vantage points, the historic skyline of Hollywood snaps into focus, from the fanciful copper piers of the Chinese Theater to the art deco tower of the old Security Pacific Bank, the pylon atop El Capitan, and the richly modeled facade of the Hollywood Roosevelt directly across the street. From this public aerie the tawdry reality of the sidewalk and the lurid signage of Tussauds disappear and the legend of Hollywood is renewed.

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Michael Webb


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