Hollywood Babylon
The Academy Awards move back home
Hollywood Babylon

An 8.7-acre Los Angeles entertainment complex, the future venue for Oscar night, tries to revive the spirit of Tinseltown.

By Ned Cramer / Photography by Livia Corona

The new Hollywood & Highland complex takes its name from the intersection on which it sits (below). Aside from a photomural of an enormous white elephant (facing page), Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn Architects’ generic street elevations say little about the Babylonian motif of the interior courtyards.
The giant elephants on columns and a great turreted gateway in Hollywood & Highland's circular central courtyard are replicas from the famous Babylon set of D. W. Griffith's silent epic *Intolerance* (facing page). At the base of the bulbous columns that support the elephants, winged, bird-headed gods guard Victoria's Secret and Brookstone (above).

The movies, like the dot-coms, were born into their own decadence, and their existence since has been a struggle to maintain that state of strange grace against Morality and The Bottom Line. Child actor-turned-radical gay filmmaker Kenneth Anger began his camp-classic social history of the industry's roaring infancy, its "Purple Epoch," as he called it, with a description of the famous Babylon set from *Intolerance*, D. W. Griffith's catastrophically expensive epic masterpiece of 1916. Anger named his book *Hollywood Babylon* after the set, which for years lingered on Sunset Boulevard as one of Los Angeles's biggest tourist attractions. He considered it a perfect object lesson, "something of a reproach and something of a challenge to the burgeoning movie town—something to surpass, something to live down."

Today, apparently, it's something to live up to. A partial, seven-eighths-scale reproduction of Griffith's Babylon set forms the centerpiece of a new, $615 million shopping and entertainment complex located in, and dedicated to, the heart of old Hollywood. The project takes its name—Hollywood & Highland—from the street corner on which it sits, in the spirit of better-known Hollywood and Vine to the east. Though the boulevard continues in either direction, the two intersections effectively serve as the eastern and western termini of Tinseltown's Main Street.

"During the golden age of the movies, in the 1920s and 1930s, Hollywood Boulevard was built and billed as everybody's image of the motion picture capital become real," wrote Charles Moore in his still-unsurpassed guide of 1984, *The City Observed: Los Angeles*, and "...some ten blocks of it became lined with elegant shops and famous restaurants and premiere movie theaters, which were themselves fabulous stage sets, inside and out; motion picture executives filled the offices above and movie stars were everywhere, or so the tourist hoped."

Despite the installation of some 2,000 terrazzo stars along the boulevard's Walk of Fame in the late 1950s, the chances of sighting a star in the flesh there were approaching nil. By the time *Hollywood Babylon* was published in 1975, faded landmarks like the art deco Max Factor Building and Mann's Chinese Theatre [sic] shared street frontage with tattoo parlors and wig shops; the feet that most commonly trod the Walk of Fame belonged to drug dealers and prostitutes (their clientele staying safely behind the wheel).

If Hollywood Boulevard had sunk to the West Coast equivalent of Times Square, Hollywood & Highland, all 8.7 acres of it, constitutes a single massive effort to replicate Times Square's recent revival as a tourist attraction. Stories about the project are pure Hollywood—conceived by a movie mogul in the image of Griffith's set, picked up and then dropped by Disney, eventually produced in a watered-down form by developer TrizecHahn, according to one telling. To ensure its success, TrizecHahn has recruited some of the biggest names in the business: the Gap, Johnny Rockets, and other restaurants and retailers; a 640-room Renaissance Hotel; a six-screen expansion of the adjacent Mann's Chinese; a 25,000-square-foot ballroom catered by
A side entrance to the complex, along Orange Street, incorporates two enormous billboards, “shadow” signage designed by Sussman/Prezina, and the entrance to a 3,000-car underground garage (above). The round form of a rooftop restaurant sits above a 640-room Renaissance Hotel that is part of the complex (at left).

Wolfgang Puck; even little Debbie Reynolds’ Hollywood Motion Picture Collection. The Hollywood Reporter (owned by the same company as Architecture) has lent its name to an electronic zipper sign on the corner of Hollywood & Highland—a bit part at best. The deal-clincher was undoubtedly the Academy Awards, which have taken a 20-year lease on Hollywood & Highland’s Kodak Theatre [again, sic—in Hollywood, it would seem, nothing spells class like t-h-e-a-t-r-e].

In a single evening (March 24), the Kodak will become one of the most recognized places in the world—a fact that has almost nothing to do with its design, and almost everything to do with the fact that the Oscars consistently entertain a larger audience than any other televised event in the world. New York City-based architect David Rockwell, of the Rockwell Group, had aesthetic responsibility for the theater proper, its proscenium-arch entrance on Hollywood Boulevard, and its publicly accessible forecourt and grand staircase. Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn Architects designed the rest of the complex, in association with a host of other firms: Alton & Porter served as architect of record; Wimberly, Allison, Tong & Goo and Cole Martinez Curtis designed the hotel; and Dianna Wong Architecture designed the ballroom.

There are few architects alive with the right measure of flair and humility necessary to make a success of such a commission. Rockwell is one of them, and if his interior at the Kodak—a tasteful whorl of silver gilt and bronze mesh—is not a masterpiece, it is definitely a crowd appeaser. The Academy and attendees will appreciate it for its glamorous evocation of 1930s movie sets, and go home pleased with the keenness of their own observation. Architects, the ones who deign to notice, that is, may just let him off the hook for having enough originality not to literally copy 1930s movie sets. As for the viewing public, the camera won’t show them much more than Gwyneth Paltrow’s dress. But it’s when Rockwell stops worrying about other people’s taste that he shows real spirit. Give the man a good theme and watch the fantasy fly, as it does at Ruby Fu’s restaurant in Manhattan, a bordello-cum-opium den of red lacquer and embroidered Chinese silk. (“Madame Chiang Kai-shek, your table is ready.”) Take it as an indicator of what he might have done with the rest of Hollywood & Highland, given permission.

There are some fun Babylonian flourishes in Hollywood & Highland’s round central courtyard: two 13,000-pound elephants on bulbous columns, a huge turreted gateway framing the Hollywood sign in the distant hills, and the vague suggestion of hanging gardens in a proliferation of unadorned balconies and external staircases. Otherwise, EKK’s architecture lapses into the cautious mediocrity typical of any high-end mall. From the street, it’s a not-quite-modern, not-quite-traditional jumble of differently surfaced and massed volumes, with a superficial layer of 12 giant billboards and two electronic signs presumably meant to say “Hollywood” in a 21st-century sort of way. The elephants say it better, frankly, even if you don’t like their accent.

Who lost their cool? Was EKK working under orders to keep the babble to a dull roar? Lee Wagman, the CEO of TrizecHahn, certainly
Hollywood & Highland consumes most of two blocks along Hollywood Boulevard’s Walk of Fame, adjoining the iconic Chinese Theatre to the west. Across the street is the El Capitan theater. The new Kodak Theatre for the Academy Awards lies along the back of the site, lopping off Orchid Avenue to the north and then continuing it again as a monumental staircase—the Awards Walk—to the south. A second, adjacent grand stair lifts visitors off Hollywood to the Babylon Court, around which most of the center’s stores and restaurants rotate. These open-air passages and courts help break down the 70-foot-high, 1.2 million-square-foot mass of the project and lend it surprisingly pleasant spatial variety.

didn’t seem enthusiastic about the Babylonian motif when I brought it up in an interview with him. “This is not a themed project,” he asserted—repeatedly. What is Wagman afraid of? That people wouldn’t take the place seriously if its design went too far over the top? Please. It’s an entertainment complex. In Hollywood.

Or was EKE stricken with intellectual guilt? I have no patience with the old political objection to spectacle in its own right, or to consumerism, or to fantasy for that matter, as detrimental to the public; what’s detrimental, and patronizing, is the assumption that the “average” mind can’t comprehend spectacle and consumerism and fantasy for what they’re worth. As for the project’s aesthetics, received architectural opinion maintains that to be smart it’s necessary to be clever—a good dose of postmodern irony to separate the elite from the masses. It’s a cheap trick, and a familiar one, which allows the overeducated to wallow in “filth” of their own creation without getting dirty.

An architectural re-creation of a scenographic vision of a biblical city is a rich premise—the kind of premise American architecture was built upon, at least until Walter Gropius and Co. took over during the Cold War. Maybe it’s time for the profession to read the writing on the wall, or at least that old copy of Learning from Las Vegas, and regain the faith that popular architecture is “almost all right”—more so than even Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown might care to admit. (It’s certainly where the money is.) Hollywood & Highland deserves to be evaluated on its own terms, not simply dismissed because it doesn’t fit with a murky academic definition of “good” architecture. Unfortunately, even according to the terms of its own architectural genre, Hollywood & Highland falls short.

EEK was clearly more comfortable in its role as planner. As a fat kid who’s new to a tough neighborhood, Hollywood & Highland fits in surprisingly well: its different volumes imply different buildings and help reduce the complex’s 1.2 million-square-foot, five-story bulk. An advertising scaffold at the intersection of Hollywood and Highland echoes a 12-story neo-Gothic tower across the street; together they neatly form a north-south gateway to Hollywood. And the arrangement of open-air courtyards and walkways within the block is excellent. Atonal variances of route, enclosure, scale, elevation, and surface make for an urban experience akin to that of medieval Florence—if you squint away the inelegant details.

On the weekend I visited Hollywood & Highland in early February, a crowd was gathered to watch Debbie Reynolds, Ann-Margret, and Melanie Griffith—representing three successive generations of celebrity staying-power and advances in cosmetic surgery—at a star-bestowing ceremony for some unrecognizable entertainment-industry elder. This just proves that Hollywood hasn’t forgotten how to put on a show—or when not to quit—even if some architects or developers have. Had any of the five set designers nominated for Oscars this year been handed the Hollywood & Highland job, the public might have gotten what it deserved: decadence that’s worthy of Intolerance.
The Kodak Theatre’s lobby centers on a grand oval staircase; the walls around it have inset panels of tiny glass beads, the kind of surface upon which movies were originally projected (above). The great proscenium arch of the Kodak Theatre’s forecourt opens onto Hollywood Boulevard, and frames a small booth selling audio tours of the street’s Walk of Fame (facing page).

HOLLYWOOD & HIGHLAND, HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA

CLIENT: TrizecHahn, San Diego—Lee Wagman (president); Jack Bousquet (vice president); Doug Curtis (senior project manager)
ARCHITECT: Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn, Los Angeles—Stan Eckstut, Ming Wu (principals); Vaughan Davies, Steve Nakada (principal-in-charge); Elaine Nesbit (project director); Deborah Booher (project architect); Sylvia Wallis, Sammy Wong, Ed Kono, Norton Ching, Collins Lozada, Misa Lund, Sharon Pei-Hwa Huang, Daisuke Tanigaki, Juan Villalta, Matthew Blake, Todd Haase, Chris Bach, Alme Propes, Jason De Pierre, Brent Gesell (project design/production)
ARCHITECT OF RECORD: Altoon and Porter Architects, Los Angeles—Ron Altoon, Gary Krenz, Ronald Benson, Ann Knudsen, Joshua Kimmel, Paul Enseki (staff)
THEATER ARCHITECT: Rockwell Group, New York City—David Rockwell (principal); Michael Fischer (senior associate); Francis Assaf, Gonzalo Bustamante, Glen Coben, Jay Valgora, Jo Walker, John Van Aken, Daniel Barrenechea, Katy Colby, Carl D’Alvia, Michael Dereskeiviwicz, Gerry Dunn, Anthony Dunne, Ragip Erdem, David Fritzinger, Scott Grodsky, Pamela Krausman, Sergey Khoroshilov, Ping Ku, Tony Layco, Don Lee, Peggy Leung, Nancy Mah, Kinnareesh Mistry, David Moore, Chris Morris, Lee Parmenter, Katherine Peng, Miguel Petruscak, Nicole Pillorge, Eve-Lynn Schoenestein, Paul Song, Gary Stluka, Steve Terr, Seaneen Thorpe, Bruce Umbarger, Rachel Urkwitz, John Van Aken, Ann-Wei Yeong, Seong-Hye Yoon, Alec Zabeller (staff)
HOTEL ARCHITECT: Wimberly Allison Tong & Goo
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Rios Associates ENGINEERS: Robert Englekirk Consulting Structural Engineers (structural); Levine/Seegel Associates (mechanical/electrical); Mollenhauer Higashi & Moore (civil)
CONSULTANTS: Dianna Wong Architecture & Interior (ballroom interior design); Cote Martinez Curtis (hotel interior design); Theatre Projects Consultants (theater); Robert Mahoney & Associates (acoustics); Fisher Marantz Renfro Stone (theater lighting); Lighting Design Alliance (awards walk lighting); Sussman/Prejza & Company (graphics); Rolf Jensen & Associates (fire protection); Lerch Bates North America (transportation); McCarthy Brothers (construction management) GENERAL CONTRACTOR: McCarthy
Construction COST: $615 million

SPECIFICATIONS