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Act Two for the Hollywood Palladium Once threatened with demolition, historic theater restored 70 years after opening

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The Hollywood Palladium glittered as bright as any star the night it opened in the fall of 1940.

Some of the hottest actresses of the time - Dorothy Lamour, Judy Garland and Lana Turner - strutted their stuff as the dance hall rocked with the big band sounds of the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra and the relatively unknown Frank Sinatra.

The Palladium quickly became Hollywood's most glamorous Swing era dance hall. Radio shows were broadcast around the world opening with the line, "Coming to you live from the world-famous Hollywood Palladium."

Nearly 70 years after first grabbing the international spotlight, the legendary ballroom on Sunset Boulevard stepped into a new phase last month.

New owner Newport Capital Advisors, led by Dave Zak and David Nix, and its investment partner, Commonfund, reopened the Palladium Oct. 15 following a major restoration project.

Two or three generations have never seen the real Palladium. The 60,000-square-foot building's Streamline Moderne Art Deco exterior has been hidden under a metal siding facade and countless coats of paint for more than 40 years, said architect Christopher Coe, shortly before completing the restoration. The Palladium is the first building to be completed under the firm he launched last year, COE Architecture International.

"We are literally bringing it back as close as we can to what it looked like on opening night in 1940," he said.

The restoration brings the Palladium almost back from the dead after the previous owner, Palladium Investors Ltd., considered tearing down the place, said Los Angeles City Council President Eric Garcetti, who has worked to save the Palladium since he was elected in 2001.

Demolishing the landmark would have erased a piece of history that's just as important to Hollywood's renaissance as the new shops, restaurants, hotels and entertainment venues, he said.

"The owners at the time approached me a few times with different ideas that would have involved tearing down the venue and redeveloping the site," he said. "But I remained firm on saving it because I think it has a place in Hollywood's future as well as its past."

NCA and Commonfund bought the Palladium in April 2007 for a reported \$68 million, and also bought three other major Hollywood properties within the last three years. Restoring the Palladium is the development team's first effort to add to the vitality of Hollywood.

"They are clearly making a huge investment in Hollywood," Coe said. "The Palladium has a cultural history to it that's just unbelievable. Architecturally, it's also very significant and these guys realized that."

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The Palladium originally was designed by European architect Gordon B. Kaufmann, who was part of Europe's modernist movement before relocating to the West Coast and creating much of early Southern California architecture.

Throughout his career, Coe, who previously worked with Richard Meier and Partners, said he has been drawn to bold Modernist buildings. Working on the Palladium gave him a chance to protect a Hollywood icon and preserve some of the area's star-studded history.

"It has been a wonderful coming together of elements in my career that have led me to this building in a way," he said.

The nightclub's grand reopening also unveiled interior renovations - primarily operational - overseen by the Palladium's new long-term tenant, concert promoter Live Nation. Two contractors were used: Morley Construction Co. for the exterior and PCL Builders for the interior.

The exterior and interior renovations began in March and cost a total \$18.5 million, with the owners paying \$8.5 million for exterior work.

The exterior's cost was affected by a remodel done in the 1960s when it became the home of the Lawrence Welk Show: The metal siding was added; storefronts were boarded up; and the original neon sign was replaced by a Googie-style coffee-shop-type sign, said Coe.

Despite the structure's architectural downward spiral, the Palladium transformed into a rock palace hosting concerts by the Rolling Stones, The Police, the Red Hot Chili Peppers and many others. The interior became battered and creaky. The number of shows and other events booked there slowed to a crawl.

By the time NCA, Commonfund and Coe's firm took on the renovation, no one knew what lay underneath.

"Frankly, its curb appeal was less than appealing," Coe said. "NCA took that leap of faith, because when they bought it, it was not very nice."

Originally, Coe only had rough black-and-white photos to use for the restoration. He found a tiny color postcard that pinpointed the colors of the neon sign. A forensic paint analysis was done by cutting into paint layers to find the color of paint next to the building, which is cast-in-place concrete. Black-and-white newsreel footage helped fill in other details.

"Luckily, the bones of this building still survived under all these layers of renovations," Coe said. "For a 70-year-old building, this was built very well."

The original neon signage was recreated with its animated, signature red letters in separate boxes spelling out "Palladium" and its Saturn-like white neon rings. The grid on both sides of the sign was uncovered and refurbished. New metal figures were re-added to the angled wing walls. The building's main body was repainted the original dark green, with cream and dark blue accents. The discovery of a glass fragment hanging off the building enabled the main entry to be reclad with blue glass that extends along the bottom of new 10,000-square-foot retail storefronts.

Live Nation took on a long-term lease due to the Palladium's historic spot in the L.A. music scene, its capacity to hold 4,000 concertgoers and its 11,200-square-foot dance floor, said company spokesman John Vlautin.

"It's an iconic Los Angeles venue. It's in the heart of Hollywood, which is undergoing a major resurgence right now. It also fits perfectly within our venue portfolio in Los Angeles," he said.

The interior renovation focused on updating the stage house and sound for today's big concerts.

"A lot of bands had to pass the Palladium because it wouldn't accommodate their production needs," Vlautin said. "The Palladium just wasn't able to keep up."

Concessions were upgraded and 50 new toilets were added, while ramps and an elevator bring the Palladium up to Americans with Disabilities Act standards, he said.

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Ten chandeliers and the curved maple floor are being restored, and the original colors are being matched as closely as possible.

Live Nation's L.A. staff and especially Brian Murphy, who heads development in Southern California, are just as attached to the Palladium as the rest of the area's music junkies because they've promoted and attended shows there for years, Vlautin said.

"For music, it's a historic venue," he said. "But there's also an emotional component to it. It's important to anyone who loves to see live music in Los Angeles."