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Under the lens at Griffith Observatory

Creating space without weakening the building's aesthetic punch was Stephen Johnson's job. Now we see how he did.

By Scott Timberg, Times Staff Writer
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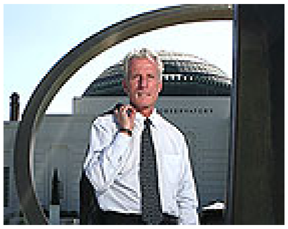

Problem Solver
(Bryan Chan / LAT)

Shaping Space
(Bryan Chan / LAT)

FROM the moment he took on the expansion of the Griffith Observatory a decade ago, Stephen Johnson knew his work would not go unnoticed.

"More than any other project we've worked on, this is an incredibly visible one," says Johnson, 56, a polished, slightly formal principal architect in the Los Angeles office of Pfeiffer Partners. "From where we're sitting, we can see almost the whole city."

And it means that any misstep won't remain a private disappointment. "This building is part of so many daily lives in Los Angeles," he says, "so there was a responsibility to make sure it remained the familiar building people saw every day." The $93-million expansion and renovation, which has been met with enthusiasm, opens to the public Friday.

Johnson isn't kidding about the view. From where he sits today at the new Café at the End of the Universe (the name evokes comic novelist Douglas Adams), a huge swath of the city spreads out. The architect's task here wasn't obvious: The observatory's expansion needed to almost triple what had been a fairly meager amount of exhibition space without substantially altering its famous form, which includes the copper domes of two telescopes and the planetarium dome.

It was clear from the beginning, says director Edward Krupp, that the visitors' view should resemble the experience in 1935, when the observatory opened to a world that knew far less than it does now about outer space. "When you're rewarded by coming up the hill and seeing it for the first time, that magnificent northern facade, with all its symmetry and formalism, should be preserved," Krupp says. He also insisted "that the great vistas not disappear." All in all, a tall order on a tight hillside plot — a problem solved by going underground.

"Those are challenges you expect to be able to meet," says Johnson, whose firm has spent decades solving this sort of problem for the expansion and historic reuse of museums, libraries and theaters, including the renovations of Los Angeles Central Library and Radio City Music Hall. (About half the firm's work, like a library at American University in Cairo, now under construction, is new.) "But the further challenge was to make sure everything that was done, and everything that was seen, had meaning to the observatory. All of the elements of the original building had a true meaning: They had a scientific purpose. So as we developed the expansion, we were trying to think through with our clients how to make sure the new elements weren't just aesthetically pleasing."

In a sense, aesthetic pleasure and science are on the same team here, as one of the proposed purposes of the expanded observatory was to accommodate both. "The intent," says Johnson dryly, "is to experience the information in a way that would make it awesome."

The limits of preservation

JOHNSON'S roots are important to understanding his work on the observatory and his sense that preservation doesn't need to take every element of a structure back to its original form. (He worked with Brenda Levin, the veteran L.A. restoration specialist, who served as project preservation architect.)

Johnson grew up near Boston — where he saw urban renewal destroy whole neighborhoods — and was educated at Columbia University before moving briefly to a Greek island to live as a bohemian writer. He worked for several firms in New York and Cambridge, Mass., as a young man, and he retains strong memories of Boston Harbor's piers being remade into housing and of the old houses on Harvard Yard being gutted and refurbished with vibrant, unorthodox interior colors.

"That really opened my eyes, in the 1970s, to the way we could celebrate preservation but also celebrate our generation as well," he says.

After working for a few years in New York with what was then called Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, Johnson came to Los Angeles in 1986 to open the firm's local office and worked on projects including the Central Library and Union Station. (The firm split into three companies, including the roughly 50-person Pfeiffer Partners, headed by Norman Pfeiffer, in 2004, which has allowed it to become more nimble, Johnson says.)

Back then, he says, the movement for historic preservation in L.A. was starting to assert itself. It was also a more literal and orthodox era. "At that time the city was far more conservative about how to treat historic properties," he says. "I think now, 20 years later, there's a recognition that projects change over time."

He points to the way homeowners redesign midcentury houses with new interiors and his firm's recent reworking of the UCLA men's gymnasium with a new interior to accommodate student activities offices.

The refurbished observatory, for instance, has not returned to its original gray but rather to white, the color it's been for half a century.

Similarly, whereas most of the work was done to retain the 1930s look, the cafe is basically contemporary. If it has any historical reference, it's the clean glass-and-metal design and indoor/outdoor living of midcentury modern homes. Even the straight preservation allowed a certain measure of unorthodoxy, he says. The 1920s and '30s were, after all, a delightfully impure architectural period in L.A.

The observatory, for instance, designed by John Austin and F.M. Ashley, is a mix of Beaux Arts, Art Deco and Greek classical; Bertram Goodhue and Carleton Winslow's Central Library, with its combination of Moderne with Mexican late baroque, and John and Donald Parkinson's Union Station, where Aztec meets Moorish, are similarly eclectic. The planetarium's heavy leather-and-steel doors are so idiosyncratic as to be indescribable, he says.

Johnson also broke from architectural tradition for an important interior space. The large underground room called the Gunther Depths of Space, which features an enormous photograph of part of the universe and scale models of the planets, was, in fact, designed to be what he calls "non-architectural."

He arranged the main wall and the axes to replicate the distribution of space above, but mostly he's trying not to evoke architectural concepts or periods. Rather, he wants visitors to be a bit lost in space. As such, the room is dark, voluminous, with a swirling dark-blue floor meant to evoke the gaseous matter between stars.

He contrasts it to his design for the Central Library's expansion, which like the observatory took about 10 years to complete and which opened to mixed reviews. "That was a place where people would stay awhile and read," he says. "This is an environment in which people are constantly moving through, so we tried to create a room that is all about motion," using curving lines and surfaces.

Krupp points out that the original design for the Depths of Space included large pillars intended to create monumentality. The idea, though, didn't work. "The architects understood this, went back and came up with these sweeping beams that look like the bridge of the Enterprise," Krupp says.

The new observatory, all told, is hardly a radical reworking of the original design. The obligation to be true to history meant a project not well suited to someone dedicated to putting a bold stamp on projects.

"There are several kinds of *stamps*," says Johnson, acknowledging that some designers might have tried to rework the observatory in broad strokes. "This is one of those projects where the delight is in the details. As visitors come and see the fabric in the Samuel Oshin planetarium, which is based on the phases of the moon, or the rubber flooring that looks like the gases in the universe, or the way to the Leonard Nimoy Event Horizon Theater glows a bit like the sun….

"Those are things that people will be delighted by — and those are very satisfying stamps."